



Political legitimacy based on religion: An analysis of sociological religion in Jambi local democracy 2024

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ABSTRACT

In Indonesia, religion has long been a major factor in determining political legitimacy, especially when it comes to local democracy. This study looks at how political actors in Jambi harness religious symbols, moral authority, and religious leaders' power to win over voters. The goal is to comprehend religion as a strategic sociopolitical tool ingrained in regional power dynamics rather than just as a set of beliefs. The study employs a qualitative research design and examines how religious narratives and practices function within electoral rivalry through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. The results show that religion serves as symbolic capital (Bourdieu) that can be converted into political capital, opening doors for legitimacy based on Weber's conception of conventional and charismatic authority. Voter turnout, candidate credibility, and public trust have all been demonstrated to be greatly increased by religion-based tactics. However, the public's reaction to these methods is similarly conflicted. Religious participation promotes social cohesiveness and moral resonance in political discourse, but it also bears the risk of social polarization and identity exclusivism, which could jeopardize the stability and inclusivity necessary for democratic consolidation. The study comes to the conclusion that religion functions as a dual-force legitimacy mechanism, supporting social integration and political leadership while simultaneously fostering factionalism in multiple communities. The ramifications highlight the need for a more critical view of religion's involvement in electoral politics, acknowledging it as a formidable tool for political mobilization as well as a possible obstacle to the growth of an inclusive and developed local democracy in Indonesia.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Religion is one of the most influential social institutions in human history. It is not only present as a transcendental belief system that connects humans with God, but also as a source of values, norms, and ethics that regulate social relations between individuals and groups (Berger, 2019; Woodhead, 2022). Emile Durkheim even placed religion at the center of collective life, where ritual practices and religious symbols create social solidarity and strengthen community cohesion (Durkheim, 2018). Thus, religion can be understood as an institution that functions not only in the spiritual realm, but also in shaping social, cultural, and even political structures.

The relationship between religion and politics is one of the classic studies in social science (Akmal, A., Sianipar, S. B., Surdikina, N., & Hutabarat, 2024). Religion is often seen as an integrative force that can strengthen the legitimacy of leadership, but on the other hand, it can also be an instrument of political mobilization and even a source of conflict (Widiatmaka, 2024). Max Weber asserts that political legitimacy can originate from three types of authority: traditional, charismatic, and rational-legal (Weber, 2020). In the context of religion-based politics, charismatic and traditional legitimacy play an important role, because people tend to place their trust in figures associated with religious values or in leaders who have the blessing of religious leaders. Political candidates who are able to build an image of piety or present themselves as moral leaders gain stronger legitimacy in the eyes of voters. Pierre Bourdieu adds a different perspective through the concept of symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 2018). According to Bourdieu, religion can be a source of symbolic capital that is converted into political capital. For example, a candidate's closeness to religious figures or organizations can increase moral recognition, which is then translated into electoral gains. This phenomenon shows that religion has a strategic role in the dynamics of modern democracy, as it functions both as a source of moral legitimacy and an instrument of political mobilization (Chanra, M., & Kasman, 2024).

Religion-based political phenomena can be found in various parts of the world. In the Middle East, political Islam is the main basis for the formation of regimes and political parties, where religious legitimacy is often stronger than formal legal legitimacy (Mandaville, 2020). In the United States, the influence of evangelical groups on national politics is very significant, especially in supporting Republican presidential candidates (Gorski, 2019). Meanwhile, in Southeast Asia, religion is increasingly seen as an instrument of political identity. For example, in Malaysia, religious issues are often a major factor in electoral politics. The same is true in Indonesia, where religion is often used to build collective identity and influence voter preferences (Mietzner, 2020).

Indonesia, as the third largest democracy in the world and the country with the largest Muslim population, presents a complex dynamic (Senjaya, B., Pahrudin, H. M., & Elviria, 2025). After the 1998 reform, Indonesian democracy became more open and provided ample space for the expression of political identities, including religious identities. This has resulted in religion becoming more prominent in the political arena, whether through religious symbols, moral narratives, or explicit support from religious leaders. Several national elections, such as those in 2014 and 2019, have shown how religious issues have become a determining factor, even causing social polarization in society (Fealy, 2018; Mujani, S., Liddle, R. W., & Ambardi, 2019). These findings indicate that religion-based politics is not merely a temporary phenomenon, but an important part of the dynamics of contemporary Indonesian democracy (Muhammad, H. A., & Anggara, 2021; Muhammad, H. A., & Nopyandri, 2021).

As one of Indonesia's regions with a strong religious tradition and a sociopolitical environment where religious identity greatly influences public life, Jambi Province was chosen as the research site. With a majority of Muslims and minorities of Christians, Catholics, and Buddhists, the environment is pluralistic but morally conservative, and religious authority is still held in high regard. In Jambi, political candidates frequently use religious symbolism in their campaigns, frame their public narratives around piety and moral integrity, and solicit support from ulema and religious institutions. According to earlier research, religious elites continue to have a significant impact on regional political outcomes (Hm, Pahrudin & Darminto, 2021). Because of these features, Jambi is a perfect place to examine how religion serves as political legitimacy in local democracies.

Religion's impact in Jambi is not unique; rather, it is a reflection of larger trends in Indonesian politics. The dynamics of religion-based mobilization in Jambi's local elections are similar to those seen in national elections, including identity politics, clerical endorsements, and the use of religious symbolism. The province is a microcosm of broader religio-political trends in Indonesia, such as the escalation of moral discourse, the expansion of religious elite power, and the growing political exploitation of religious identity. Analyzing Jambi thus sheds light on how national trends materialize locally and how local religious dynamics influence the national consolidation—or disintegration—of democracy.

There are still significant gaps in the extensive research on Indonesia's religion-political relationship, particularly with regard to national elections, identity politics, and religious

mobilization. First, despite their strong religious character, places like Jambi are understudied in the literature that is currently available because it frequently concentrates on large urban centers like Jakarta, West Java, or South Sulawesi. Second, the majority of research focuses on political outcomes at the macro level rather than the micro-sociological processes that involve the construction, negotiation, and symbolic exchange of religious legitimacy at the local level. Third, there aren't many studies that examine how religious authority influences election results by combining Weberian legitimacy, Bourdieu's symbolic capital, and current Indonesian political dynamics.

This research addresses these gaps by analyzing the mechanisms through which religion becomes a source of political legitimacy in Jambi, examining local practices of symbolic mobilization, and situating them within both national and global theoretical frameworks.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a case study design and a qualitative methodology. Because the study intends to gain a thorough understanding of the phenomenon of religion-based political legitimacy within the social, political, and cultural context of Jambi society, this approach was chosen (Creswell, J. W., & Poth, 2018). The researcher can examine particular religiously motivated political mobilization and legitimacy practices using a case study design, as well as how local communities, religious leaders, and political actors perceive and react to these practices (Yin, 2018).

The study covered the pre-election dynamics, the campaign period, and the post-contestation phase over a ten-month period, from January to October 2024. During this period, the researcher was able to track shifts in voter behavior, elite political tactics, and religious narratives throughout the local political cycle.

Purposive and snowball sampling were used to choose informants based on the following standards: 1). Political Actors: Those directly involved in the Jambi local election process of 2024, such as regional head candidates, members of the campaign team, political consultants, and party organizers, who employed or responded to religious endorsements, moral narratives, or symbols in their political strategies. 2). Religious Leaders: Religiously influential people, including Islamic clerics (ulama, ustadz, kyai), religious organization leaders (NU, Muhammadiyah, MUI, FKUB), and Christian, Catholic, and Buddhist leaders who participate in interfaith or political debates. They must be well-known in the community and possess social authority. 3). Voters: Jambi City citizens with a range of ages, religious beliefs, educational backgrounds, and political inclinations. Both traditional-religious and critical-modern constituencies were represented in the voter pool. The selection of informants was based on their familiarity with, participation in, and impact on religiously motivated politics. To reach more important players whose contributions to the dynamics of religious legitimacy were not immediately apparent, snowball sampling was employed.

This study interviewed 32 informants in total: 10 religious leaders (7 Muslim clerics, 3 leaders from Christian/Catholic/Buddhist communities), 10 voters (balanced across age, gender, education, and religious background), and 12 political actors (4 candidates/representatives, 5 campaign team members, and 3 political party officials). Diverse viewpoints from the key players in religion-based political legitimacy are guaranteed by this composition.

A number of tactics were used to preserve research objectivity because politics and religion are extremely delicate and value-laden. In order to continuously assess personal prejudices and presumptions throughout the data collection and analysis process, the researcher maintained a reflexive journal. By comparing statements from voters, religious leaders, and political actors, source triangulation was carried out. Interviews, observations, and document analysis were all incorporated into the triangulation method. Selected informants verified preliminary interpretations of interview data to prevent misrepresentation and guarantee meaning accuracy. Because the interview questions were meant to be open-ended and non-leading, informants were able to voice a range of opinions—some of which were even contradictory—about the role of religion in politics. Despite the delicate nature of the subject, these techniques increase the findings' dependability and credibility.

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data (Braun, V., & Clarke, 2006). This involved organizing and transcribing the data, coding it systematically, identifying the main themes

pertaining to legitimacy based on religion, and interpreting the results using Bourdieu's symbolic capital and Weber's legitimacy theory. By mapping interview statements and observed practices onto Weber's three legitimacy types (traditional, charismatic, and rational-legal), identifying how religious practices (such as clerical endorsements, piety imagery, and moral narratives) function as symbolic capital in Bourdieu's sense, demonstrating how symbolic religious practices are transformed into electoral support (political capital), and illustrating tensions between symbolic-traditional legitimacy and the demands of contemporary democratic rationality at the local level, the final step involved turning empirical findings into theoretical explanations.

Empirical observations from Jambi were methodically linked to more general theoretical frameworks through this analytical process, guaranteeing that the study offers both descriptive findings and conceptual insights into the connection between religion and political legitimacy.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The results of the study show that religion in Jambi not only functions as a personal belief system, but also as a source of political legitimacy that has a strong influence. This finding reinforces Peter L. Berger's classic view that religion provides a "sacred canopy" that overshadows social life, including in the political sphere (Berger, 2019). This sacred canopy provides moral meaning as well as justification for political actions, so that political actors who are able to connect themselves with religious values tend to gain stronger legitimacy in the eyes of the community. From Émile Durkheim's perspective, the function of religion in collective life is to maintain social solidarity (Durkheim, 2018). In the context of local politics in Jambi, religion functions as a glue that connects candidates with voters through symbols of piety and morality (Halim, 2019, 2020). For example, narratives about "trustworthy leaders" or "religious leaders" are seen not only as political slogans, but as moral symbols that contain religious meaning. Thus, political legitimacy obtained through religion is often considered more authentic than claims based solely on rational programs.

Max Weber divides legitimacy into three forms: traditional, charismatic, and rational-legal (Weber, 2020). In the case of Jambi, religion became a medium that strengthened two forms of legitimacy. First, traditional legitimacy was manifested in the support of religious leaders who had been respected for generations. Religious leaders are considered to have legitimate moral authority, so their support for certain candidates carries significant political weight. Second, charismatic legitimacy is evident in the image of the candidate's piety, where religious impressions become a charismatic resource that adds to electoral appeal. However, religion-based legitimacy rarely transforms into rational-legal legitimacy, which is based on legal rules and formal democratic procedures. This imbalance creates a dilemma: democracy at the local level appears to be functioning, but in practice it is still heavily influenced by religious personality and traditional relationships, rather than entirely by legal rationality. This situation shows that local democracy in Jambi is still caught between modern practices (political institutionalization) and traditional-religious heritage.

Pierre Bourdieu emphasizes that every social arena has rules (field) and resources (capital) that are contested (Bourdieu, 2018). In the political arena, religion functions as symbolic capital that can be converted into political capital. Symbolic capital in the form of religious recognition, moral legitimacy, and an image of piety is used by candidates to increase their electoral appeal. A concrete example can be seen in political campaigns that feature candidates in religious activities, such as attending religious lectures, using Islamic symbols, or emphasizing closeness to religious scholars. This practice demonstrates the process of converting symbolic capital (religious values) into political capital (voter support). In other words, religion is not only a belief system, but also a strategic asset that can be mobilized for political purposes.

According to research findings, the population in Jambi has a mixed opinion about the relationship between religion and politics. This is indicative of a larger sociopolitical dynamic throughout Indonesia, where religious symbolism is still both a source of legitimacy and a point of dispute. Traditional religious communities, which include local ecclesiastical networks, rural inhabitants, and elders, generally agree that religion should be a fundamental factor in political decision-making. They hold that political power must have its foundation in spiritual integrity and view religious leaders (ulama) as stewards of morality and ethical instruction. Through apparent

piety and ethical dependability, religion serves as a normative framework that governs collective morality, protects against corruption and moral degradation, and validates political leadership in this environment. This view is consistent with Weber's concept of traditional legitimacy, which holds that established religious hierarchies and moral norms provide the basis for obedience and confidence (Weber, 2020).

However, not everyone agrees with this viewpoint. A markedly critical and skeptic attitude toward religion-based politics is seen among the younger, more urban, and better-educated parts of Jambi culture. Rather than being a manifestation of true faith, these groups typically view the overt employment of religious speech and symbols in political campaigns as a tactical tool. They believe that religion is becoming more and more politicized and commodified, becoming a symbolic tool for political advantage rather than a useful moral code for governance. This mindset is consistent with Mietzner's research, which shows that identity politics are becoming less popular throughout Indonesia, especially among urban voters who are exposed to civic education, pluralistic ideals, and digital information flows that promote political literacy and critical thinking (Mietzner, 2020). This pushback in Jambi is a reflection of a broader societal shift: as educational attainment increases and digital media grows, political reason starts to challenge religious passion in determining voter preferences.

In local democracy, this dualism of perception—between moral idealism and critical pragmatism—creates a complicated legitimacy environment. Religion-based politics continue to strengthen moral unity and guarantee that leaders maintain common principles derived from Islamic ethics for traditional communities. Political actors can readily rally community trust and gain symbolic authority if they are able to successfully align themselves with these religious aspirations. On the other hand, the same tactics may come off as theatrical, dishonest, and anti-modern to younger and better-educated individuals, undermining political trust. To put it another way, religious legitimacy works selectively, strengthening its position among some societal groups while diminishing it among others.

This ambivalence has significant ramifications. First of all, it shows that in local politics in Jambi, religion continues to be a potent but erratic source of legitimacy. It has the power to evoke strong feelings and strengthen a sense of community, but it may also cause distrust and estrangement among those who respect openness, skill, and reasoned, lawful government. Second, rather than existing in harmony, this phenomena marks a shift in political culture, where traditional-religious and modern-secular orientations coexist in tension. The ensuing political rhetoric frequently veers between technical rationalism, which prioritizes policy, performance, and accountability, and moral populism, which appeals to religious solidarity.

Furthermore, the ambiguity is indicative of a larger trend of disputed religious symbolism in Indonesian politics. The democracy process that followed the Reformasi era not only increased political involvement but also created opportunities for identity mobilization. Mietzner notes that counter-movements supporting civic nationalism and pluralism have progressively reacted to the initial upsurge of religious and ethnic identity politics in the 2010s (Mietzner, 2020). This national trend is concentrated in places like Jambi due to the interaction of local customs, Islamic conservatism, and generational shifts. While the younger generation, influenced by higher education, urban culture, and digital connectivity, demands authenticity, policy substance, and institutional accountability from political figures, the older generation, shaped by communal life and moral authority structures, frequently embraces religion as a source of moral order.

In Weberian terms, this generational difference also reflects the development of legitimacy types. While charismatic legitimacy emerges when candidates successfully incorporate religious piety with their personal appeal, traditional legitimacy still flourishes among conservative communities who associate religiosity with moral righteousness. However, when political communication overly depends on symbolic religiosity rather than administrative competence, rational-legal legitimacy—which is based on procedural fairness and institutional performance—remains poor. Therefore, religion-based politics in Jambi serve as a double-edged sword: it helps some groups maintain their moral credibility while also impeding the development of democratic logic.

In conclusion, the electorate's ambivalence about religion-based politics in Jambi highlights how democratic legitimacy in post-Reformasi Indonesia is fractured. Deeply ingrained cultural structures are reflected in the continued use of conventional and charismatic sources of legitimacy, but a new rational-political consciousness is emerging as educated and younger voters become more skeptical. In order for democracy to progress beyond symbolic religiosity to a more inclusive and accountable institutional framework, it will be necessary to integrate moral integrity with rational-legal governance, which presents a political challenge.

Religion-based politics is closely related to identity politics. As Hadiz shows, religious identity politics often becomes an instrument of populist mobilization in Southeast Asia (Hadiz, 2018). In Jambi, identity politics emerges in the form of religious exclusivity that associates ideal leadership with a particular religious identity. The effects are twofold. On the positive side, religion can serve as a glue for religious community solidarity, encourage political participation, and increase the legitimacy of candidates. On the negative side, religion-based politics has the potential to create social segregation, reinforce the dichotomy of "us" and "them," and cause polarization between majority and minority groups. This phenomenon echoes the warning by Aspinall & Fossati regarding the risk of democratic regression in Indonesia due to the strengthening of identity politics (Aspinall, E., & Fossati, 2020).

Religion-based legitimation practices in Jambi reflect the dynamics of local democracy after the reform era (Hai, 2024). Democracy at the local level provides greater space for the expression of identity, including religious identity. However, this space for expression is often exploited by political actors for electoral gain. A study by Mujani, Liddle, & Ambardi shows that religion is one of the most influential factors in voting behavior in Indonesia (Mujani, S., Liddle, R. W., & Ambardi, 2019). This is also evident in Jambi, where religion is one of the main determinants of electability. However, if this practice is not managed properly, it can hinder the consolidation of democracy by creating exclusivism and reducing the quality of public deliberation.

The growing reluctance of younger, urban, and educated voters to accept religion-based political legitimacy is one of the study's most important conclusions. Unlike the elder generations, who believe that religion is an inherent and unquestioned basis for political power, the younger generation sees the use of religious symbolism in campaigns as performative, instrumentalized, and becoming less and less connected to real policy issues.

Political religiosity feels "constructed" rather than authentic, as younger informants emphasized repeatedly. This sentiment is part of a larger trend that scholars like Mietzner have predicted: younger Indonesians are becoming more skeptics about political identity branding and more in line with civic, pluralistic, and rational-legal values (Mietzner, 2020). This change is evident in Jambi, where young voters are starting to doubt religious performances' intentions rather than taking them at face value. A 22-year-old university student explained:

"Candidates think if they post photos in mosques or wear Islamic clothes during campaigns, we will automatically trust them. But for us, that feels staged, not sincere." (Interview, Informant Y12).

Since political expressions are more participatory and less hierarchical in digital spaces, young voters' skepticism is particularly apparent there. Local community forums, X, TikTok, and Instagram have evolved into platforms for critical discourse. Real-time commentary, fact-checking, or pointing out inconsistencies between a candidate's record as a governor and their public religious performance are common forms of digital critique. This is a new form of political accountability that is fueled by online public participation rather than institutional mechanisms. One participant described this dynamic:

"On social media, we expose candidates who suddenly become 'religious' during campaigns. We fact-check them, screenshot inconsistencies, and call them out." (Interview, Informant Y7).

The youth political repertoire heavily incorporates satire, memes, and humor. By redefining political religiosity as trivial, humorous, or ridiculous, these counter-narratives serve as a means of delegitimizing it. Young voters use irony to undermine the legitimacy of identity politics rather than directly challenging religious authority, a tactic that is still delicate in Jambi's sociopolitical context. For example, during interviews, a number of participants shared memes that made fun of

candidates who only engage in religious activities during the campaign. This is consistent with what Billig (2005) refers to as banal subversion—commonplace humorous acts that subtly challenge prevailing narratives without resorting to direct conflict. In this case, lighthearted criticism erodes the sacred aura that surrounds legitimacy based on religion. One informant explained:

“We use humor because it’s safer, but also more powerful. When you turn a political act into a joke, you take away its aura.” (Interview, Informant Y4).

Younger voters consistently rejected appeals based on identity or religion in favor of competence, transparency, and issue-based governance. They criticize the use of religion in political rivalry rather than religion per se. This change reflects a shift toward rational-legal legitimacy (Weber, 2020), in which administrative integrity, performance, and expertise—rather than cultural or religious symbolism—are used to evaluate political authority. Younger voters in Jambi thus constitute a transitional group that must balance conventional hierarchies with contemporary demands for governance. A 27-year-old civil society activist stated:

“We don’t care what religion the candidate displays. Show us your program on jobs, transport, governance. That’s what matters.” (Interview, Informant Y21)

Younger voters' opposition is generational rather than individual, indicating a growing divide in the ways that various age groups view political legitimacy. While younger voters prioritize structural reforms, anti-corruption initiatives, and technocratic governance, older voters frequently equate moral integrity with religiosity. Several family-based disputes that informants reported showed these tensions. These conflicts show that religious symbols' moral authority is no longer universally acknowledged, especially among urban youth whose political upbringing is influenced by globalized civic discourses, higher education, and digital media. One young respondent shared:

“My parents say I’m not choosing the ‘right’ leader because I’m not prioritizing religious values. But for me, choosing based on religion feels outdated.” (Interview, Informant Y18)

Theoretically, these results imply that political legitimacy needs to be reevaluated in light of democratizing societies. Among younger generations, religion, which has traditionally served as a major source of traditional legitimacy, is losing its automatic political power. Youths' political behavior instead conforms to civic-pluralist legitimacy support for leaders who express inclusive, pluralistic values instead of exclusive identity frames, digital-empowered legitimacy shaped by participatory online publics where claims can be contested, fact-checked, or ridiculed, and rational-legal legitimacy trust based on competence, transparency, and performance. This intricate change suggests that Jambi's political system is moving toward a hybrid legitimacy framework, in which religious symbolism may even incite opposition from younger voters and no longer ensure electoral acceptance.

The emergence of youth resistance has important ramifications. 1. Campaign tactics need to change because candidates can no longer depend solely on symbolic gestures or religious endorsements. Issues based on performance are becoming more and more important. 2. Political parties are under pressure to reorient; those that mainly depend on religious networks may have to adopt technocratic agendas in order to stay competitive. 3. Democratization picks up fresh steam Transparency is strengthened and clientelist-religious patronage structures are undermined by digital critique and public dialogue. 4. Political polarization potential As generational gaps widen, disputes between traditionalist and reformist voters could emerge, influencing future power structures and political alliances.

Significant disparities in the perspectives of religious minority groups (Christian, Catholic, and Buddhist communities) on religion-based political mobilization are also discovered by the study. Although minorities in Jambi generally accept Islam's cultural domination, they voice concerns about: 1). Majoritarian Exclusivism: By establishing implicit social divisions between "insiders" and "outsiders," the use of Islamic identity as a political requirement has a tendency to marginalize groups that do not share the majority's religious identity. 2). Fear of Polarization: Minority groups worry that overly religious discourse may strengthen the "us vs. them" division, which could lower their sense of security or political engagement. 3). Pragmatic Adaptation: To guarantee representation and safeguard minority interests, some religious leaders from minority groups take a pragmatic approach by negotiating access to political actors or participating in intergroup discussions. Aspinall & Fossati's (Aspinall, E., & Fossati, 2020) worries about

democratic regression through identity-based appeals are echoed by this dynamic. Although minority groups in Jambi do not, in reality, reject religion, they are wary of political tactics that strengthen the power of the majority.

The substantial influence of social media in influencing opinions about candidates' religious legitimacy is another noteworthy finding. Religious narratives are amplified, challenged, or changed on social media platforms, which act as a battlefield. Three trends were noted: 1). Amplification of Piety Performances: Content featuring candidates praying, going to religious lectures, or getting blessings from clerics is curated by campaign teams. Symbolic capital is strengthened by the widespread circulation of this imagery. 2). Counter-Narratives and Debunking: Social media is frequently used by younger, more informed voters to refute or reveal religious performances as political theater. The aura of piety is undermined by critical commentary, memes, and fact-checking. 3). Algorithmic Echo Chambers: While more secular or critical users are fed content that challenges symbolic political performances, conservative users are frequently fed religious-political content that bolsters charismatic legitimacy. Therefore, social media shapes polarized perceptions of political claims based on religion by serving as both a legitimizing machine and a delegitimizing arena.

Overall, the results demonstrate that while religion-based legitimacy in Jambi is very successful with traditional communities, it is becoming more and more disputed with minority and young voters. This ambivalence illustrates the selective nature of religious legitimacy, the coexistence of modern and traditional political rationalities, and the increasing conflict between rational-legal governance and moral populism. Religion continues to be both a potential source of polarization and a unifying moral force. As a result, religion-based politics in Jambi have two sides: they increase social trust but also run the risk of causing exclusivism and sectarian division. These results demonstrate that maintaining moral integrity while fostering inclusive, rational-legal institutional development is essential to the future of local democracy in Jambi.

4. CONCLUSION

This study shows that in Jambi's local democracy in 2024, religion remains a potent but conflicting source of political legitimacy. Among traditional, rural, and older constituencies, religious symbols, clerical endorsements, and moral narratives continue to have a significant impact. This supports Weberian traditional and charismatic legitimacy and strengthens Bourdieu's idea of symbolic capital as a political asset. Religion gives these groups a moral compass that validates leadership, builds trust, and promotes group cohesion. However, urban, younger, and better-educated voters are increasingly challenging religious legitimacy because they believe that its use in politics is instrumental, performative, and unrelated to substantive governance. Their inclination toward issue-based politics, institutional accountability, and rational-legal legitimacy points to a generational shift that is changing the political terrain of local democracy in Indonesia following Reformasi. The findings also show the ways in which digital media dynamics, minority viewpoints, and larger identity politics interact with legitimacy based on religion. Though they express concerns about majoritarianism and exclusion, minority religious communities generally accept Islam's cultural dominance. Social media, meanwhile, amplifies counter-narratives that expose or mock religious performances as well as those that legitimize them. This dichotomy highlights how religion has two sides: while it can foster community ties, it can also exacerbate polarization and "us versus them" divisions.

The results make multiple contributions to identity politics, symbolic power, and legitimacy theories. First, the coexistence of rational-legal, religious, and charismatic legitimacy among various demographic groups indicates that legitimacy in democratizing societies is multi-layered and hybrid rather than sequential as classical theorists frequently believe. Second, the study builds on Bourdieu's theory of symbolic capital by demonstrating how religious symbols generate symbolic resistance and transform into political capital among young people who are digitally literate. This suggests that participatory online publics are becoming a more important means of contesting symbolic power. Third, by showing that religious identity mobilization is still successful but is becoming more susceptible to criticism, satire, and fact-checking from younger citizens who call for issue-based governance, the findings contribute to the body of knowledge on identity

politics in Southeast Asia (Aspinall, E., & Fossati, 2020; Hadiz, 2018). In this way, Jambi is an example of transitional legitimacy, where modernist and traditionalist rationalities coexist in conflict within the same democratic space.

Additionally, this study has practical ramifications for policymakers, civil society, and political players. The results show that religious endorsements by themselves are no longer enough for political candidates and parties to win over a large number of voters. In order to meet the demands of young people for performance, policy specificity, and transparency, effective political communication must combine moral legitimacy with technological know-how. The findings emphasize the necessity for civil society organizations to promote inclusive discussions that lessen polarization, combat damaging identity mobilization, and improve political literacy. The study concludes by emphasizing the significance of institutional reforms that strengthen rational-legal trust for policymakers. These reforms include anti-corruption agendas, participatory governance, and transparency mechanisms, which help to balance the dominance of symbolic-religious narratives.

This study adds methodologically, conceptually, and empirically to the body of knowledge regarding local democracy in Indonesia. It broadens the geographic scope of research on religion and politics beyond major cities like Jakarta or West Java by offering unique empirical insight from Jambi, an understudied provincial context with strong religious roots. From a conceptual standpoint, it offers a framework for comprehending religious legitimacy as digitally mediated, selective, and generationally distinct, which can guide further research in Indonesia and elsewhere. Methodologically, the study reveals the micro-sociological mechanisms through which legitimacy is created, negotiated, contested, and transformed in daily political life by incorporating interviews with religious leaders, political actors, minority groups, and young people.

The study's overall conclusion is that, while religion will continue to play a significant role in Jambi's political legitimacy, its authority is becoming more disputed and conditional. The ability of political institutions to balance the moral demands of religious communities with the rational-legal demands of a younger, pluralist, and technologically savvy electorate will determine the future of local democracy in Jambi and, by extension, Indonesia. Preventing polarization, bolstering democratic consolidation, and cultivating a more resilient and inclusive political order all depend on striking this balance.

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