

Harnessing Faith: Religion in Political Communication During North Lombok's 2024 Elections

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Abstrak: Pilkada Lombok Utara 2024 menyoroti peran mendalam agama dalam politik Indonesia, dengan kandidat memanfaatkan narasi agama untuk membentuk identitas dan memobilisasi dukungan. Studi ini mengeksplorasi dinamika ini melalui pendekatan metode campuran, menggabungkan wawancara kualitatif dan diskusi kelompok terfokus dengan survei kuantitatif. Dengan menganalisis afiliasi agama, ketaatan, dan perilaku pemungutan suara, penelitian ini mengungkapkan bagaimana tema agama memengaruhi strategi kampanye dan preferensi pemilih, menggarisbawahi signifikansinya dalam politik elektoral.

Abstract: *The 2024 North Lombok Regional Election highlights the profound role of religion in Indonesian politics, with candidates leveraging religious narratives to shape identities and mobilize support. This study explores these dynamics through a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative interviews and focus group discussions with quantitative surveys. By analyzing religious affiliation, observance, and voting behavior, the research reveals how religious themes influence campaign strategies and voter preferences, underscoring their significance in electoral politics.*

Keywords:

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I. Introduction

Simultaneous elections in the 2024 city in Indonesia. This change originated from Law Number 1 of 2015, as amended by Law Number 6 of 2020, which mandates the corresponding election of governors, regents, and mayors (Darmawan & Falah, 2022).

The role of religious beliefs in political participation is well-documented, with evidence suggesting that faith can significantly motivate individuals to engage in political processes. Koralage emphasizes that religious beliefs serve as a catalyst for political engagement, mirroring findings from various contexts, including the United States, where religious institutions play a pivotal role in facilitating political participation (Koralage et al., 2022). This notion is further supported by Said et al., who argue that religion is a critical determinant of voting behavior, influencing how voters perceive candidates and their policies (Gul Said et al., 2021). The interplay between religion and politics is not merely transactional; it shapes community identities and mobilizes collective action, as seen in the dynamics of local governance where faith leaders often act as communal representatives (Smith, 2010).

In the 2024 North Lombok Regional Election, all three candidate pairs carry the title "Tuan Guru" and are associated with religious symbolism, reflecting their backgrounds. Among them, Dr. Najmul Akhyar, M.H., born in Menggala on June 14, 1972, has significantly contributed to the development of the North Lombok Regency. Previously serving as deputy regent and later as regent, Dr. Najmul has made notable strides in regional progress. Beyond governance, he has been

deeply involved in education, founding Islamic boarding schools such as Hidayaturrahman, Darul Iman, and Al-Bayan Vocational School, which now educates over 1,000 students nationwide. He is also a prominent Nahdlatul Wathan Diniyyah Islamiyah (NWDI) organization member.

Religious themes are pivotal in Indonesian elections, with secular and religious leaders leveraging them to secure voter support (Assyaukanie, 2019). Campaign strategies often center on identity politics, mainly rooted in ethnicity and religion, as political parties seek to connect with voters (Fuat et al., 2024). Candidates frequently incorporate religious narratives into their political messaging, mainly when maintaining ties with religious leaders like Kyai, to garner trust in devout communities (Taufiq et al., 2022a). Commercializing religious practices is now commonplace, with politicians employing religious symbols and affiliations with clerics to build their leadership image and attract followers (Lubis et al., 2024). This approach has intensified societal polarization and influenced the recruitment of politicians for electoral gain, underscoring the enduring importance of religious themes in Indonesian elections at both regional and national levels.

Likewise with Dr. Muhammad Zaki Abdillah, Lc.MA is the running mate of the Dany Zaki candidate pair. He pursued MTS and MA studies at Al-Istiqomah Kapu, North Lombok, and graduated among the top 100 students from Al-Azhar University. Known as a lecturer, he regularly speaks at mosques and Islamic institutions locally and nationally. With strong backing from Islamic parties like PKS and PAN, along with thousands of supporters and a dedicated team, the pair is prepared for the regional elections. Dr. H. Lalu Muchsin Effendi, M.A., the Regent candidate for the Muchsin-Junaidi pair, is a scholar, Muslim thinker, and academic. As a lecturer at UIN Mataram specializing in Islamic Studies (Dirasat Islamiyyah), he has also served as secretary of the Islamic Religious Education Doctoral Program. The prominence of religious themes in candidate profiles highlights their continued significance in regional contests. This study aims to analyze how candidates utilize religious issues in political communication during the 2024 North Lombok Regional Elections, reflecting their central role in campaign strategies.

The political dynamics in Indonesia, especially in Lombok, are increasingly shaped by Islamic narratives. Makinuddin highlights how the communicative features of the Al-Qur'an are utilized to shape political identity and discourse (Makinuddin, 2021). This trend illustrates the broader use of religious texts as instruments in political power contests, emphasizing the complex interplay between religion and governance in the region. Religion's political influence extends beyond mobilization, as it also involves crafting narratives that align with voters' beliefs and values (Doja, 2022).

Although the connection between religion and political participation is well-documented, there is still a lack of understanding of how these interactions unfold in specific electoral scenarios, such as the upcoming North Lombok elections. While extensive research exists on religion's role in political discourse, less emphasis has been placed on grassroots religious community mobilization and their approach to navigating political complexities in a diverse society. Although (Özgül, 2019) examines grassroots mobilization, its focus on Turkey makes it less applicable to the Indonesian context and has therefore been excluded. Moreover, the influence of digital platforms on religious political communication remains underexplored, particularly in how they enable or limit the articulation of religious identities in politics (Bellar, 2017).

II. Literature Review

A. *Orientation and Religious in Indonesia*

Religious themes are important in Indonesia's political communication, especially during elections. Candidates often use religious messages to gain support from devout communities (Taufiq et al., 2022b). The North Lombok Regional General Election Commission uses cultural events and educational programs to encourage voter participation (Fathurrijal et al., 2024). Candidates use social media platforms like Twitter to present themselves as devout and attract voters. The rise of religious sentiments in politics has deepened divisions between nationalist and

religious groups, particularly since the 2017 Jakarta election (Arjon, 2018). This suggests that religious messaging is not always decisive in voter behavior.

Opinion leaders are key in shaping public opinion during elections and campaigns. They are typically active supporters of political parties or candidates on platforms like Facebook (Karlsen, 2015). These individuals are defined by strong political interests and personality traits rather than outgoing behavior (Winter & Neubaum, 2016). They use interpersonal and group communication to influence voters in their communities. Their motivations for political discussions on social media include raising awareness and enhancing their public image. Understanding their characteristics and motivations is crucial for analyzing social media's role in electoral politics.

Studies on voter behavior in Indonesia reveal diverse factors shaping electoral choices. Urban and middle-class voters prioritize policies and economic issues, reflecting rational decision-making (Jati, 2022). Rural voters, however, are often influenced by sociological factors like religion (Lestari et al., 2021). Youth voters in some areas focus on problem-solving and policy-based approaches over ideology (Hamsah et al., 2023). Traditional influences, such as party loyalty and candidate appeal, remain significant (Bariguna et al., 2021). Media, role models, and local leaders also impact voter preferences, highlighting Indonesia's complex and multifaceted voter behavior.

B. Religious Statement in Indonesia

The use of religion in Indonesian elections has become a significant issue, particularly in social media campaigns (Achfandhy et al., 2024). Politicians often use religious symbols and imagery to gain support and engage voters (Zaluchu et al., 2019). This has shifted religion from private to public, fueling identity politics. Muslim identity and religious ties are frequently exploited in presidential candidate selection. Religious events and institutions are used to justify political choices, creating flexible interpretations. Over-politicizing religion threatens national unity and stability (Kamil et al., 2024). These practices have encouraged hate politics and the manipulation of religious sentiments for political advantage.

III. Research Method

Qualitative approaches are vital for examining the intricate ways religion influences political discourse. Vera-Revilla underscores the significance of understanding the relationship between politics, communication, and religion, asserting that effective communication enables leaders to shape public opinion and mobilize support (Vera-Revilla et al., 2024). This highlights the need for detailed interviews and focus group discussions with key figures, such as religious leaders, political candidates, and voters, to gain insights into their perspectives and experiences regarding religion's role in political participation.

Alongside qualitative research, quantitative methods offer empirical insights into the connection between religious affiliation and voting behavior. For instance, Said et al. demonstrate the importance of religion as a key factor in electoral choices, using statistical analysis to show how faith shapes voter preferences (Gul Said et al., 2021). Surveys measuring religious affiliation, levels of observance, and political attitudes can provide valuable data for identifying broader trends in voter behavior in North Lombok.

IV. Discussion

A. Orientation and Religious Issues of Pilkada in 2024

The highlights of the results of the 2024 Pilkada election show Paslon 1 as the decisive winner with the highest total votes (nearly 70,000). Paslon 1 consistently outperformed its rivals across all districts, including Tanjung, Gangga, Kayangan, and Bayan, demonstrating broad voter support and widespread acceptance. Paslon 2, with approximately 50,000 votes, secured second place in most districts but fell short of mounting a significant challenge to Paslon 1's dominance. Paslon 3, receiving around 32,000 votes, ranked third overall and only achieved a relatively better performance in Tanjung, where it placed second. Based on the above, the result of election 2024



Fig. 1. 2024 election recapitulation graph

The data demonstrates that Paslon 1 enjoys significant voter appeal and influence across all regions, making it the decisive winner. Meanwhile, Paslon 2 shows moderate but consistent support, and Paslon 3 struggles to compete, reflecting limited reach. The chart effectively highlights the broad gap in voter preference between the candidates, with Paslon 1's performance far exceeding that of its competitors.

B. Religious Symbols

Research indicates that religious symbols and attire significantly influence Indonesian politics, especially in local elections. Candidates often wear Islamic clothing, such as skullcaps, turbans, and hijabs, to create a political identity and attract voters (Herdiana, 2020). These symbols convey devotion, tradition, and cultural values (Kautsar et al., 2024). Using Islamic symbols in campaigns is not just decorative but helps build cultural identity and boost electability. However, it may also lead to conflicts and tension during elections (Jeremy J. Kingsley, 2012). Candidates strategically use Islamic attire to reflect ideological visions or improve their electoral appeal.

C. Master Degree

In the social environment of the people of Lombok, they always standardize about what is called something good and what is bad in what the Guru has taught them. Tuan Guru for the Sasak people is a figure who has a high position and is assumed to be the main figure in the preservation and teaching of Islamic teachings on the island of Lombok, especially in upholding amar ma'ruf nahi munkar (invitation to goodness and preventing evil).

In the 2024 North Lombok regional election contest, the three candidate pairs with the status of Tuan Guru, Najmul Akhyar, Muhamad Zaki Abdillah and Dr. Muksin are alim ulama or Tuan Guru in the life of the people of North Lombok.

D. Souvenirs in Political Campaigns

The giving of money or generally consumer goods by candidates and parties to voters as a form of exchange for the recipient's vote. Voters feel obligated to vote for a candidate or party that has given them something. In general, the distribution of goods and money in the North Lombok regional election consists of three phases. First, before the election. Usually what is distributed is money and goods such as basic necessities. Second, during the campaign period and ahead of the election. Most of them are in the form of giving cash. It is usually coordinated and distributed as transportation money. Another way is to insert money into props during the campaign. The peak

of money politics is the night until the day of the election. The distribution of money in that phase is usually referred to as the dawn attack.

E. Candidate's Religious Actions and Attitudes

1) Political Communication to Religious Leaders and Islamic Institutions

In political contests, gatherings or political safaris are mandatory for political actors or actors. In the context of the Regional Elections, the candidates will conduct intensive gatherings with religious and community leaders. This is based on the opinion that the choice of a figure or opinion leader will affect the choice of the community. If we go back to the theory of active reception, then actually the determinant of political choices in society is the society itself. Because they will actively document information from candidates through various sources. Opinion leaders are one source but not the only one. This means that the public is actively looking for and exploring candidates who will advance in the Regional Elections. However, in the context of the people of North Lombok, especially in traditional society, the position of Opinion Leader is still considered by both political actors and the community.

One of the cases is the appearance of Ustad Abdul Somat or UAS as a supporter of the Danny-Zaki pair, which has a significant influence on the victory of candidates in his area, namely Bayan. As a well-known preacher or religious preacher throughout the country as well as a close friend of Muhammad Zaki Abdillah, UAS has appeared since Zaki declared that he would run for office to fight in the North Lombok political scene. UAS often appears on social media of the Danny-Zaki couple and attends public campaigns in Bayan District. This significantly affected the victory in Bayan District. This means that the patron-client factor in the people of North Lombok is still thick, especially in rural areas.

The Najmul-Kus couple used the opportunity of the regional elections to visit the residence of the Chairman of the MUI held by TGH. Abdul Karim Abdul Gofur, Najmul-Kus specifically asked for prayers of blessing and advice on what to do in the election contest. In contrast to Najmul-Kus, the Danny-Zaki candidate pair held a gathering and asked the leaders of Islamic boarding schools such as the leaders of the Al Istiqomah Kapu Islamic Boarding School. Meanwhile, the Muksin-Junaidi couple visited the Muslimat Nahdlatul Ulama organization to ask for prayers of blessing and support.

The title Tuan Guru is actually a term used by the people of Lombok to refer to the elite of Islam. Several other terms are used to refer to Islamic religious leaders or figures, such as Buya in West Sumatra, Ajengan or Abuya in Sundanese society, Tengku in Acehese society, Sheikh in North Sumatra, and Kiayi Java. Meanwhile, the name of the religious elite for the people of North Lombok is Tuan Guru, the same as in other Lombok regions, namely those who are active in delivering da'wah, giving lectures, sermons and filling in studies. In addition, he is a role model, a moral figure and has broad religious insights.

The three pairs of Candidates for Regent and Deputy Regent of North Lombok are actively in touch with religious leaders and religious scholars. In addition to staying in touch, the arrival of the three candidate pairs was also to ask for prayers of blessing and advice in the election contest in North Lombok.

2) Ziarah

In general, the pilgrimage behavior of politicians is related to certain political moments such as regional elections. The political moment that is proposed is the choice of the time of the politician's pilgrimage because it is related to the interests of the politician itself towards the moment, whether for personal interests or parties, is considered as part of efforts to increase electability and popularity. Of course, local politicians generally only make pilgrimages at that moment and very rarely at the moment outside what is stated. Except at the moment of haul, politicians also tried to get involved in the celebration.

The Muksin-Junaidi candidate couple made a pilgrimage to several tombs that are considered to have high religious value, including the Malka Tomb, the tomb of Raden Mas Maditen, the Makom Peterenan, and the Sesait Tomb. The purpose of the grave pilgrimage carried out by the Muksin-Junaidi couple, friendship with the spirits of the ancestors to get the spirit spiritually.

What was stated was at least strengthened by the fact that there was a choice of moments in pilgrimage as another form of affirmation of stronger political interests. In addition, the choice of moments that are said to be directly related to political issues, based on the reality stated, it can actually be said that the behavior of politicians' pilgrimages is a political pilgrimage.

3) *Istighosah, Studies and Other Religious Programs*

The pair of Regent Candidates and Deputy Regent Najmul-Kus carried out istighosah and recitation activities during visits to Islamic boarding schools, in this case Islamic boarding schools under the auspices of NWDI. The purpose of visiting these Islamic boarding schools is of course in order to get support.

In addition, the candidate couple Danny-Zaki also carried out prayer and dhikr activities with Ustad Abdul Somat (UAS) in Bayan District and actively visited Islamic boarding schools in order to get support. Like wise with the Muksin-Junaidi pair.

Support among the kiai seems to be a rampant phenomenon in the North Lombok election this time. Politicians use the kiai to get the support of the masses and politicians take advantage of the momentum to carry out istighosah, recitation or even help religious programs from the kiai. That is, there is a kind of meeting between demand from politicians and supply from kiai. It can be said that politicians and kiai are both active in visiting each other. Politicians prefer recitation and istighosah because they have a clear congregation with a clear domicile.

4) *Political Communication in the 2024 Regional Election*

a) *Vision, Mission and Work Program of Candidate Pairs*

As a district characterized by Islamic values, North Lombok certainly needs a leader who understands well how to improve the quality of religious teachers, especially those who have the status of traditional educators who are scattered in various corners of North Lombok. Najmul Akhyar, Candidate for Regent of North Lombok in gathering activities and asking for prayers for the blessing of Islamic boarding school leaders and religious leaders for their desire to improve the welfare of teachers and officials of houses of worship in various regions of North Lombok. To get support from Islamic boarding schools, the Najmul-Kus couple promises to re-enforce the old program, namely the Regional Boss (BOSDA) in order to improve the welfare of honorary teachers both in public and private schools, including teachers in Islamic boarding schools, and provide scholarships for students who memorize the Qur'an (Hafiz Quran).

In addition, the Danny-Zaki couple to attract support from religious leaders and Islamic boarding schools in their Vision and Mission promises to provide PTT and GTT Teacher Incentives including teachers at Islamic boarding schools, Marbot, Ngaji Teachers, Traditional and Religious Institutions. There is no differences from other candidate pairs, the Muksin-Junaidi couple also gave political promises in their Vision and Mission, namely improving the quality of education in Islamic boarding schools through improving infrastructure, educators and education personnel. As well as providing scholarships for underprivileged and outstanding students.

b) *Campaign Team Pairing Candidate*

In the event that the campaign is carried out by the supporting political party and candidate pairs, the campaign can also be carried out by a combination of political parties and the campaign team (KPU RI, 2024). The Najmul-Kus couple formed a Campaign Team for the district and sub-district levels. Results in the field show that the Najmul-Kus Campaigners involved a lot of religious leaders and community leaders. One of the campaign activities was carried out in Gangga District, Bentek Village and Segara Katon Village (KPU KLU, 2024), many teachers and religious leaders were also present and became campaigners for the Najmul-Kus couple, namely Tuan Guru Haji (TGH) Suaeb

Yusuf, TGH Rasidi, TGH Mukhtar Amin, TGH Jamuhur Hakim, TGH Mustahiq, Tuan Guru Haerul Faridi, Tuan Guru Wildan, TGH Jamahur Hakim, and many more. The number of religious leaders involved in every campaign activity of the Najmul-Kus couple can be concluded that religious leaders have the biggest role in the victory of this couple.

Similar to the Najmul-Kus couple, the Danny-Zaki couple also established a Campaign Team in their campaign activities. The Danny-Zaki couple appointed a Campaign Team from politicians, businessmen, NGOs, traditional leaders, and religious and community leaders. Haji Raden Nuna Abriadi as the Chairman of the Campaign Team, as is known he is a politician from the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP), I Made Kariyasa a politician from the Indonesian Democratic Party (PDIP), Yanto an NGO, Mustiadi a politician from the PKS Party, Raden Miling and Raden Rianom he is a traditional leader of Bayan, Yardianto and Cahyadi, a successful businessman of North Lombok (KPU KLU, 2024). The Danny-Zaki couple's campaign activities were carried out in Loloan Village, Bayan District and in the Empak Mayong field, Kayangan District, on November 9, 2024, the Danny-Zaki couple presented Ustad Abdul Somat (UAS) as the Campaigner. The presence of the national cleric who graduated from Al-Azhar Egypt further strengthens support for the couple supported by the three political parties.

The Muchsin-Junaidi couple appointed a Campaign Team from politicians and community leaders (KPU KLU, 2024). In the general meeting campaign held by the Muchsin-Junaidi couple at Tioq Tata Tunaq Field, Tanjung District on November 20, 2024, we can see that there are religious leaders as campaigners in these activities, including TGH. Sukarman Azhar Ali, TGH. Said, TGH. Zohni. On this occasion, North Lombok Regent Candidate number 3, TGH Muchsin invited all people to remain enthusiastic until the day of voting, the presence in this grand campaign as a grand gathering of MJA to encourage each other until this second.

c) Political Communication Media for the 2024 North Lombok Regional Election

As a strategy, the campaign must pay attention to various things, such as positioning, branding, segmentation, media strategy and non-media campaign forums. The positioning in question is the placement of political products and political images to the public, so that the presence of the products and political images offered has a difference from others. In this context, Najmul-Kus has a relatively distinguishable positioning from other candidates, because of his position as an incumbent, who has a long career in the bureaucracy. This couple raised the issue or slogan of the campaign "Experience is Important". This slogan is able to hypnotize the public through billboards, the internet, and leaflets. The Najmul-Kus couple packaged a positioning statement in the tagline 'United for KLU Getting Forward'. Positioning statement is indeed a mantra that is expected to be able to anesthetize constituents, thus diverting the constituents' attention from negative campaign exposure from their political opponents. One of the meanings of this slogan is that all people, both Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists, unite to vote for the Najmul-Kus couple.

In general, the term brand is the same as a trademark or trademark. Meanwhile, the term branding in the context of political marketing is more interpreted as a strategic effort to develop an identity to attract public attention and interest to get to know political products better. Brands are not just talking symbols; Ideally, he promises supporters to give something special. One of the slogans used by the couple Danny Carter Febrianto and Muhammad Zaki Abdilla is carrying the theme "Towards a Great KLU", which has the meaning of an effort to continue what is already and currently owned to be better, one of which is the harmonious arrangement of social, cultural and religious life. There is no inferior to the Najmul-Kus and Danny-Zaki pair, the Muchsin-Junaidi couple positioned themselves as newcomers by carrying the slogan "New Direction" and branding themselves with "People's Movement for Change". The Muchsin-Junaidi couple is determined to make changes for the people of North Lombok.

Publication in the mass media is carried out through the dissemination of positive news about the Muchsin-Junaidi couple, which often goes directly to the community (blusukan) to remote areas carried out by this couple is also used as news by social media managed by the Muchsin-Junaidi couple team such as the news on the M-JA Media Center Facebook account on October 3, 2024 with the title "MJA Combed Remote KLU". The image as a pair of candidates who are pro-people

is very attached to the Muchsin-Junaidi couple, through the flagship program of Dusun Mandiri, this couple is determined to solve the problem of poverty in North Lombok.

According to the Muchsin-Junaidi couple, poverty is one of the calamities that have been ordained by Allah to occur, whether experienced by individuals, families, or certain groups of people, poverty has a negative impact on beliefs (faith) and behavior. Christian missionaries exploit poverty and lack of community resources to spread Christianity among these communities, poverty is also the dominant factor in the outbreak of immoral community behavior; And to avoid poverty and meet the needs of life, there are many crimes of theft, murder, adultery, and the sale of prohibited goods.

It is undeniable that these things have a bad impact on individuals and the people of North Lombok. Allah mentioned the situation of polytheists where some of them kill their children, either because of the poverty they experience or because they are afraid of being subjected to poverty. God said of the first group:

وَلَا تَقْتُلُوا أَوْلَادَكُمْ خَشْيَةَ إِمْلَاقٍ ۗ نَحْنُ نَرْزُقُهُمْ وَإِيَّاكُمْ ۚ إِنَّ قَتْلَهُمْ كَانَ خِطْئًا كَبِيرًا ﴿٣١﴾

Meaning : Do not kill your children for fear of poverty. We are the ones who provide sustenance for them and (also) for you. Killing them is a great sin.) Al-Isra' /31.

V. Conclusion

The 2024 North Lombok Regional Election highlights the deep interconnection between religion and politics in shaping voter behavior and campaign strategies in Indonesia. Candidates extensively use religious symbols, pilgrimages, and affiliations with Islamic institutions and figures to establish credibility and attract voter support. Religious leaders and opinion leaders play a pivotal role in mobilizing political participation, while strategic branding and communication underscore the complexity of electoral dynamics in the region. However, this heavy reliance on religious sentiment poses potential risks, including the politicization of religion, identity politics, and social polarization. As religion continues to shape political narratives, there is a growing need for balanced and inclusive political communication that addresses the diverse socio-economic challenges faced by the community, particularly within Indonesia's evolving socio-political and digital landscape.

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