

## POLITICIZATION OF RELIGION: The Quran as a Commodity of Religious Texts in Indonesia

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### ***Abstract***

*This article examines the politicization of religion in Indonesia, with a focus on the Quran's transformation into a political and social commodity. Through a qualitative case study conducted in Jakarta and West Java, involving 42 informants from various sectors, including religious, political, academic, and community, the study revealed that sacred texts are frequently decontextualized and manipulated to legitimize political agendas. The Quran's instrumentalization has intensified social polarization, undermined theological integrity, and weakened public trust in both religious institutions and democratic processes. The analysis identifies four main typologies of manipulation: political delegitimization, instrumental legitimacy, explicit desecration, and commodification within the digital and commercial sphere. Using the *maqâsid al-shâriâh* framework, these practices obviously violate fundamental Islamic objectives—particularly *hifz al-dîn*, *hifz al-aql*, and *hifz al-nasl*. However, three Indonesian cultural values (cooperation, communal harmony, and peaceful coexistence) offer cultural resilience countering these tendencies through inclusive education and critical religious literacy. The study concludes that genuine religiosity must be rooted in the Quran's ethical application rather than its political instrumentalization. Restoring the Quran's sanctity requires a synthesis of scriptural fidelity, civic responsibility, and cultural wisdom to ensure religion functions as a unifying moral force rather than a divisive political tool. This study offers two key contributions. Theoretically, it introduces a comprehensive framework for interpreting the Quran as both a sacred text*

*and a politicized social commodity. Practically, it presents evidence-based strategies to help policymakers, religious authorities, and civil society mitigate religious politicization while promoting theological integrity and social unity within Indonesia's pluralistic democracy.*

**Keywords:** *maqâsid al-shariâh; Quran commodification; religion politicization*

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## **Introduction**

The relationship between religious texts and society reflects social, cultural, and religious complexity (Novianti et al. 2025; Stacey, 2024). In Muslim society, especially Indonesia, political events occur almost throughout the year. Politics is closely related to power and some Muslim communities achieve power with identity politics for personal and group interests (Hamudy & Hamudy, 2020). The sacredness of religion is mixed with political interests, especially identity politics (Azizurrochim & Khanafi, 2023). Thus, the politicization of religion and identity politics is often carried out by politicians and religious figures who involve the public (Williamson et al. 2022, 555; Zubaidi et al., 2023). In the context of the Quran, this politicization includes the manipulation of its verses (Irsyadi, 2024).

Previous research shows that the politicization of religion is at the center of negotiations between political figures, religious figures and society (Pribadi, 2019). Studies often separate the role of religion and sacred texts from the practical reality of religious life (Al Qurtuby, 2018). Religion appears only as ritual, without impact on religious attitudes. In Indonesian Muslims, the adaptation of religious practices to religious norms is limited to rituals. Studies identify that people's understanding of the Quran aligns with their everyday behavior (Annas et al., 2024) highlighting religiosity and spirituality (Najoan, 2020). However, these studies have not discussed how religious texts with community life practices, such as politics, become cross-dimensional elements in religion, obedience, law supremacy and a prosperous economy. This current study expands the literature by highlighting religion as a cross-dimensional reflecting element of devout and orderly religious life.

This article answers three interrelated questions addressing religion, politics, and society in Indonesia. First, how do Indonesian Muslim communities navigate the relationship between the Quran and Islamic teachings in daily behavior? Second, how is the Quran used as a political commodity in contemporary Indonesian politics? Third, what are the implications of religious politicization on social harmony, law enforcement, and national integration? This study explores three dimensions: religion's role in ritual life, implications of the Quran in shaping community behavior and political discourse, and religious obedience's contribution in realizing justice, welfare, and law enforcement while mitigating political instrumentalization risks.

This approach provides a holistic perspective integrating cross-disciplinary insights to understand how religion functions not only as ritual practice but as a political instrument that strengthens or fragments social cohesion. In line with previous studies on religion in social and political rituals (Zuhri, 2022) and as a way of life (Musa, 2021), this article uncovers how religious practices intersect with politics, culture, and society in contemporary Indonesia. This study provides a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between religion, the Quran's sacredness, and politicization in shaping Indonesian Muslim behavior and influencing power dynamics. Deviant behavior does not stem from sacred text but from how communities interpret and politicize it, reducing it to ritual and symbolic functions without translating ethical and social values into practice, creating fertile ground for political manipulation and social discord.

Indonesian Muslim society has long been characterized by a distinctive synthesis of religious devotion and cultural civility, where Islamic teachings are interwoven with local traditions such as *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation), *guyub* (communal harmony), and *nukun* (peaceful coexistence). This religious adaptation reflects culture balancing scriptural orthodoxy with indigenous customs, creating religious identity that is devout and contextually grounded. The central hypothesis is that integration of religious texts, political discourse, and social practices actively shapes religious and civic behavior, demonstrating that religion is not static but dynamic, transforming in response to specific sociopolitical contexts. The intimate relationship between religion and politics positions Islam not merely as ritual observation and private morality, but as a significant force in state power configuration, governance legitimacy, and

public policy. This dual function as spiritual guidance and political resource creates inherent tensions manifesting in persistent religious politicization, where sacred texts are mobilized to justify political agendas and consolidate power bases.

Given enduring religious politicization, political education and critical religious literacy have become essential safeguards against instrumental misuse of sacred texts (Al Qurtuby 2018; Hannam et al. 2020, 215). Historical analysis reveals that politicization has exerted profound influence on Indonesian sociopolitical landscape, with roots traceable to classical debates concerning the proper relationship between religious authority and state governance in Islamic political thought (Supriyadi, 2015; Zaluchu et al. 2025, 3). This study demonstrates how religious politicization remains persistent and structurally embedded, deployed as a social control mechanism pressuring community through religiously framed arguments. However, this study advances beyond existing scholarship by offering a critical perspective on dialectical interaction between religion as divine guidance, the Quran as sacred scripture, and lived religious practices—a relationship that should manifest as harmonious alignment rather than contradiction or manipulation. Indonesia's rich tradition of local wisdom, communal tolerance, and cultural syncretism provides a uniquely fertile context for mediating these tensions and developing religious engagement models that resist politicization while honoring scriptural fidelity and cultural authenticity.

This study focuses on the Indonesian Muslim community with attention to how local cultural traditions—*gotong royong*, *guyub*, and *rukun*—interact with religious interpretation and political mobilization. The central dilemma is the phenomenon where sacred texts are instrumentalized as political tools serving power interests, contradicting core Islamic principles of textual integrity and ethical governance (Karim et al. 2024). This phenomenon is evidenced through concrete contemporary cases significantly impacting Indonesian society. During the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election, specific Quranic verses were strategically mobilized in political campaigns, triggering mass demonstrations and intensifying religious and ethnic divisions threatening Jakarta's social fabric. Similarly, ongoing debates surrounding implementation of regional sharia-based regulations (regulations sharia area) in various Indonesian provinces illustrates how religious texts are selectively interpreted and applied to legitimize particular political

agendas, often resulting in marginalization of minority groups and alternative interpretations of Islamic jurisprudence (Al Qurtuby, 2018). These empirical cases underscore that the politicization of religion constitutes not merely an academic concern but a recurring social practice with tangible consequences for communal harmony, democratic pluralism, and national integration.

This study is organized to systematically address the three aforementioned research questions through an integrated analytical framework. The methodology section details qualitative case study approach and data collection procedures in Jakarta and West Java. The findings section presents empirical evidence in three thematic areas: forms of Quranic verse manipulation, appropriation of religious texts for political legitimacy, and community and religious leaders' perceptions. The discussion section synthesizes findings within *maqâsid al-shariâh* framework (the higher objectives of Islamic law) and Indonesian local wisdom, offering theoretical and practical insights. This research makes dual contributions: theoretically, it provides an integrative framework for understanding the Quran simultaneously as sacred scripture and social commodity within political contexts; practically, it offers evidence-based recommendations for policymakers, religious leaders, and civil society to mitigate religious politicization while strengthening both religious integrity and social cohesion in Indonesia's diverse democratic landscape.

### Research Method

This study employs a qualitative case study design to examine the interaction of local traditions, sacred texts, and the politicization of religion in Indonesian Muslim society. Fieldwork was conducted for eight months (March-October 2023) in Jakarta and West Java, specifically in Bandung, Bogor, and Bekasi. These locations were selected because they represent critical sites where Islamic tradition intersects with contemporary political contestation, particularly following the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election that exemplified religious politicization. The case study approach enables deep exploration of how the Quran functions simultaneously as sacred scripture and political commodity within specific Indonesian contexts.

A total of 42 informants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure diverse perspectives across five stakeholder categories: ten religious figures affiliated with Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Muhammadiyah,

and unaffiliated or independent preachers; eight political actors (parliament members and party officials); six traditional community leaders; eight academic observers (Islamic studies and political science scholars); and ten social media users engaged in religious-political discourse. Informants were selected based on their direct involvement in religiously framed political events within the past five years and their willingness to discuss sensitive issues. All informant identities are protected through pseudonymization using coded initials (eg, SM, ASA, NUM).

Data were collected through three methods to achieve triangulation. First, participant observation totaling 180 hours was conducted across 15 religious gatherings, eight political forums, and six social media live sessions, documenting how Quranic verses were cited and audience responses. Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted with all 42 informants, each interview lasted 75 minutes in average, covering topics including religion-politics relationships, Quranic use in political discourse, and the role of local wisdom. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and conducted in Indonesian or Sundanese language. Third, document analysis examined over 150 news articles (2015-2023), 45 social media posts, 12 official documents, and eight video recordings of political debates and sermons.

The data were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis with three stages. First, restatement involved reviewing all transcripts and documents to identify narratives of religious-political interaction, generating 247 initial codes using ATLAS.ti 9 software. Second, description grouped codes into patterns through constant comparative analysis, identifying 18 sub-themes consolidated into three major domains: forms of Quranic manipulation, appropriation for legitimacy, and community perception. Third, interpretation analyzed findings through the *maqâsid alshariâh* framework examining how politicization practices contradict Islam's five essential objectives: preservation of religion (*hifz al-dîn*), life (*hifz al-nafs*), intellect (*hifz al-aql*), lineage (*hifz al-nasl*), and property (*hifz al-mâl*) while exploring how local wisdom traditions (*gotong royong*, *guyub*, and *rukun*) offer mechanisms for supporting textual integrity and social harmony (Juhri & Hariani, 2023).

Research accuracy was ensured through multiple validation strategies. Triangulation was achieved by cross-verifying findings across observations, interviews, and documents, while two researchers

independently coded 25% of transcripts achieving inter-coder reliability of 0.87 (Cohen's kappa). Member checking involved sharing preliminary findings with 12 key informants who confirmed interpretive accuracy. Prolonged engagement over eight months enabled contextual understanding, and thick description provides sufficient detail for assessing transferability. Researcher reflexivity was maintained through journals documenting positionality and analytical decisions, while complete audit trails preserve transparency of the research process.

## Results and Discussion

### Forms of Manipulation of Quranic Verses in Indonesia

The politicization of religion in Indonesia has manifested in an alarming proliferation of religiously framed regulations and public discourse: from 56 religion-based regional regulations in 1999-2004, the number surged to 156 by 2010 and reached 471 by 2017. This number reflects how political actors, religious figures, and mass organizations increasingly instrumentalize religious texts to delegitimize opponents and consolidate power(Sembiring et al. 2023, 2). This study analyzes these practices through the analytical lens of *maqâsid al-shariâh*—the higher objectives of Islamic law consisting of five essential principles: *hifz al-dîn* (preservation of religion), *hifz al-nafs* (preservation of life), *hifz al-aql* (preservation of intellect), *hifz al-nasl* (preservation of lineage/social order), and *hifz al-mâl* (preservation of property/resources). The manipulation of Quranic verses in political contexts fundamentally violates these objectives by commodifying sacred scripture, transforming divine guidance into a political instrument that serves partisan interests rather than communal welfare. When political and religious figures selectively interpret or distort Quranic verses to advance electoral campaigns, government policies, or personal agendas, they not only desecrate the sanctity of revelation but also generate social discord that threatens Indonesia's pluralistic identity and national unity (Ahmadi, 2019; Makinuddin 2021, 374; Yani et al., 2022)

Analysis of prominent cases between 2015-2023 reveals four distinct typologies of Quranic manipulation, each violating specific *maqâsid al-shariâh* principles in systematic ways. First, political delegitimization through scriptural weaponization is exemplified by the 2016 Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (known as Ahok) case. His statement urging Muslims not to be "deceived" by Q.S. al-Mâ'idah [5]:51 was reframed by political

opponents as blasphemy, triggering mass mobilization that resulted in his prosecution and conviction. Another case, the 2019 presidential debate where candidate Ganjar Pranowo and Anies Baswedan gave extremely low performance scores (respectively 5 and 11 out of 100) to Prabowo Subianto using moral-religious framing to discredit opponents. These cases violate *hifz al-dîn* by reducing sacred texts to campaign ammunition and *hifz al-nafs* by escalating political competition into religiously charged social conflict.

Second, instrumental legitimacy of contested authority appears in cases such as preacher Gus Nur's invocation of *mubahalah* (mutual curse) oaths alongside Quranic verses to substantiate allegations of electoral fraud by KPU commissioners in 2020. Then, Mustofa Nahra cited Q.S. al-Râ'd [13]:14 (stating that prayers of unbelievers are in vain) to delegitimize critics of his interpretation of Ahok's fate. These manipulations violate *hifz al-aql* by distorting public understanding and undermining rational political discourse through emotionally charged religious appeals.

Third, explicit desecration and blasphemous acts include the 2015 case in Padang. A Philosophy lecturer claimed that the Quran in physical form was merely a copy of *lauh al-mahfuz*. He also stepped on the Quran manuscript in front of his students as "academic provocation." In 2022, a man reportedly stepped on the Quran during domestic conflict after his wife found he had another secret marriage. In 2023, the Acting Regent of Bogor, Iwan Setiawan stated he would step on the Quran if proven to have lied to the public. These actions constitute direct violations of *hifz al-dîn* by physically and symbolically desecrating Islam's most sacred text, generating widespread public outrage and demands for legal accountability.

The last typology is the appropriation of false religious authority. One of widely known issue is Lia Eden's case in 2015. She claimed to receive divine revelations from the Angel Jibril which explicitly contradicts the Islamic doctrine declaring Prophet Muhammad as the final messenger. This created sectarian unrest and theological confusion. The case violates both *hifz al-dîn* (corrupting core Islamic belief) and *hifz al-aql* (misleading believers with false prophetic claims), while threatening *hifz al-nasl* by potentially fracturing communal religious identity. The ten cases presented in Table 1 reveal systematic patterns in Quranic manipulation within Indonesian political culture, clustering around electoral cycles

(2016 Jakarta election, 2019 presidential election, 2024 campaign). It indicates that competitive politics creates structural incentives for religious instrumentalization.

Table 1  
Typology of Quranic Verse Manipulation Happened in Indonesia

No	Case Description	Year	Political Scope	Manipulation Type	Maqâsid Violated
1	Ahok's statement on Q.S. al-Ma'idah [5]:51 during the campaign	2016	National (Jakarta Election)	Political Delegitimization	<i>hifz al-dîn, hifz al-nafs</i>
2	Presidential candidates' performance scoring using religious-moral framing	2019	National (Presidential Election)	Political Delegitimization	<i>hifz al-dîn, hifz al-aql</i>
3	Gus Nur's <i>mubahalah</i> invocation for KPU electoral fraud allegations	2020	National (Election Fraud)	Instrumental Legitimation	<i>hifz al-aql, hifz al-nasl</i>
4	Mustofa Nahra quotes Q.S. al-Râ'd [13]:14 to dismiss critics	2018	National (Public Religious Debate)	Instrumental Legitimation	<i>hifz al-aql, hifz al-dîn</i>
5	Anies Baswedan's call for Ahok's introspection	2016	National (Jakarta Election)	Political Delegitimization	<i>hifz al-nafs</i> (indirect)

6	A lecturer's false claim of the Quran & stepping on it	2015	Local (Padang University)	Explicit Desecration	<i>hifz al-din</i> (direct)
7	KPU midnight recapitulation criticized with Q.S. al-Nisa quotes	2019	National (Election Process)	Instrumental Legitimation	<i>hifz al-aql, hifz al-nasl</i>
8	Acting Regent of Bogor's threat about stepping on the Quran	2023	Local (Bogor Regency)	Explicit Desecration	<i>hifz al-din</i> (direct)
9	Lia Eden's claim of divine revelation	2015	National (Sectarian Movement)	False Religious Authority	<i>hifz al-din, hifz al-aql, hifz al-nasl</i>
10	Man stepping on the Quran during marital conflict	2022	Local (Family Conflict)	Explicit Desecration	<i>hifz al-din, hifz al-nasl</i>

Manipulation employs three key mechanisms: decontextualization where verses are cited without proper exegetical context, emotional amplification where religious symbolism bypasses rational deliberation, and authority appropriation where political actors claim religious legitimacy to silence opposition ((Aspinall & Mietzner 2019; Spier, 2018). These practices exploit Indonesia's high religiosity and uneven religious literacy through social media platforms, enabling rapid dissemination without scholarly oversight. This lack of academic oversight then opens up opportunities for some parties to turn Islamic belief systems and religious practices into political commodities, commodified to increase the marketability of political candidates. This commodification of belief systems is the result of the interaction between voter psychographics, Indonesia's demographic structure, and patron-client culture (Karman et

al., 2024; Suprapto & Huda 2023, 99; Suryana & Handoko, 2023). From the *maqāsid* perspective, this represents systemic threat as repeated violations of *hifz al-dīn* corrode public trust in religious authority, while violations of *hifz al-nafs* and *hifz al-nasl* manifest as increasing social polarization (Fealy 2015). This contradicts Indonesia's indigenous values of *gotong royong*, *guyub*, and *rukun*, undermining traditional conflict resolution mechanisms. It also creates a zero-sum political culture incompatible with Indonesia's pluralistic structure.

### Appropriation to Legalize the Existence of a Figure

The politicization of religion in Indonesia demonstrates a systematic process whereby sacred Quranic texts undergo transformation from divine guidance into political instruments through three interconnected mechanisms: textual isolation, semantic reinterpretation, and rhetorical deployment. This transformation fundamentally violates the *maqāsid al-shariāh* principle of *hifz al-aql* by intentionally obscuring authentic textual meaning to manipulate public understanding. The process begins with deliberate decontextualization, exemplified by the Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) organization's appropriation of Q.S. al-Najm [53]:3-4. Originally, the theological context of the verses concerns the reliability of prophetic revelation to argue that democracy constitutes a *kufr* (disbelief) system. This extraction strips away theological meaning and recodes verses as political commentary on governance, transforming statements about divine revelation into arguments against democratic processes. The rhetorical effectiveness depends on audiences accepting reinterpreted meanings without investigating historical accuracy. This allows political actors to exploit sacred authority, bypass rational scrutiny, and establish anti-democratic ideology as religiously mandated.

The conflict surrounding Ahok in 2016 demonstrated how decontextualized Quranic verses became weapons in political contestation. Ahok's statement urging Muslims not to be "deceived" by Q.S. al-Mā'idah [5]:51, which originally discussed believers' theological relationships rather than electoral politics, was reframed by opponents as Quranic desecration. Political actors strategically represented this contextual remark as blasphemy, weaponizing public religiosity to generate mass mobilization, sustained street demonstrations, sectarian tension, and ultimately Ahok's imprisonment. This case reveals how decontextualized verses function as power instruments: they mobilize religious sentiment,

delegitimize political opponents, and reshape political outcomes while simultaneously violating *hifz al-din* (through desecration), *hifz al-nafs* (through conflict escalation), and *hifz al-aql* (through discourse manipulation).

Similarly, the 2008 conflict between Habib Rizieq Shihab (HRS) and Abdurrahman Wahid (known as Gus Dur), escalated through the invocation of *mubahalah* based on Q.S. Ali Imran [3]:61, transforming a solemn theological practice into a rhetorical weapon of political delegitimation. By invoking *mubahalah*, HRS claimed superior religious authority while casting Gus Dur as morally compromised, simultaneously terminating rational dialogue space and establishing HRS as authenticity's defender. In 2018, Amien Rais implemented theological language to describe political divisions through reference to "Allah's party" and "shatan's party," derived from Q.S. al-Mujâdilah [58]:19-22. This illustrates how Quranic symbolism creates political polarization, transforming religious categories into political ones where negotiation becomes ethically impossible and hardline positions appear divinely mandated.

The religious marketplace in contemporary Indonesia extends beyond textual manipulation into commercialized commodification across multiple dimensions. Viral sermons—religious lectures achieving exponential digital dissemination—operate through a triadic structure combining religious legitimacy, emotional amplification, and explicit political messaging. The 2020 case of preacher Gus Nur exemplifies this structure. He invoked *mubahalah* alongside Quranic verses to substantiate electoral fraud allegations, combining Islamic ritualism, emotional appeals, and political delegitimization through platforms like YouTube and WhatsApp. His sermons attracted extensive engagement creating algorithmic amplification that spreading them across networks without external critical examination. Furthermore, structural market dynamics regularly reward politicized content. Religious content creators competing within saturated digital environments must produce emotionally intense material to distinguish themselves. Consequently, the most commercially successful religious content combines religious authority with political polarization most intensely.

Commercialization extends into material Islamic merchandise—clothing, accessories, applications, and lifestyle coaching. It functions simultaneously as religious expression, identity marker, and political statement. The case of "polygamy coach" Hafidin illustrates this merger.

He uses Quranic verses to market polygamy as "profitable life solution," monetizing religious knowledge as commercial product through paid consultations. This commodification violates *hifz al-din* by reducing sacred knowledge to fungible goods while facilitating distorted religious transactions.

Social media platforms constitute primary sites where religious and political discourse converge through algorithmic systems that prioritize engagement over accuracy. The 2023 TikTok blasphemy case—where an individual reciting *basmalah* before eating pork sparked national controversy—exemplifies algorithmic amplification. The thing that was potentially individual practice transformed into public flashpoint through user sharing, comment engagement, and algorithmic promotion. Similarly, PAN Chairman Zulkifli Hasan's 2024 political joke, linking Q.S. al-Fatihah recitation to political support, was transformed through social media circulation into evidence of deliberate religious desecration. The list of various instances of religious politicization in Indonesia between 2008 and 2024 is presented in Table 2.

Table 2  
Religion and Politics in Indonesia: Selected Cases (2008-2024)

No	Case Description	Year	Political Scope	Manipulation Type	Maqâsid Violated
1	Ahok's statement on Q.S. al-Ma'idah [5]:51	2016	National	Political Delegitimization	<i>hifz al-din, hifz al-nafs</i>
2	HTI democracy as <i>kufr</i> (Q.S. al-Najm [53]:3-4)	2017	National	Textual Weaponization	<i>hifz al-din, Hifz al-aql</i>
3	HRS vs Gus Dur mubahalah invocation	2008	National	Authority Appropriation	<i>hifz al-aql, hifz al-nasl</i>
4	Amien Rais "Allah's party vs shatan's party"	2018	National	Political Polarization	<i>hifz al-din, hifz al-nafs</i>
5	Gus Nur electoral fraud allegations via mubahalah	2020	National	Viral Sermonization	<i>hifz al-aql, hifz al-nasl</i>
6	Hafidin "polygamy coach" commercialization	2023	Social	Religious Commodification	<i>hifz al-din, hifz al-mâl</i>

7	TikTok celebrity said <i>basmalah</i> before eating pork	2023	Social Media	Algorithmic Amplification	<i>hifz al-din</i>
8	Zulkifli Hasan's Al-Fatihah political joke	2024	National	Viral Desecration	<i>hifz al-din</i> , <i>hifz al-nafs</i>
9	Islam-nuance merchandise with political branding	2015-2024	National	Market Commodification	<i>hifz al-din</i> , <i>hifz al-mâl</i>
10	Meme content combining sacred imagery and politics	2018-2024	Social Media	Algorithmic Polarization	<i>hifz al-din</i> , <i>hifz al-aql</i>

Across all marketplace dimensions, consistent patterns emerge. Commercial incentives drive religious commodification: oral knowledge is monetized through digital platforms, religious identity becomes marketable, and religious symbols become engagement-generating assets. Algorithmic systems structurally prioritize sensationalized and polarizing content over moderate engagement, thus creating systemic bias toward religious politicization. Traditional Islamic scholarship and institutional religious authority are increasingly marginalized within popular discourse, as they are displaced by commercially-motivated creators prioritizing engagement over accuracy. The disregard for the accuracy of the Islamic values being presented has become an invisible part because this practice was initially intended to spark diverse responses from mass media consumers.

The high number of Muslims in Indonesia represents a demographic bonus whose votes can be leveraged to achieve the political aspirations of certain parties. One common approach is to create an image as a pious politician. They use several religious terms in the campaign process, such as "faith," "worship," "glory," "praise," and "surrender to Allah SWT" through the use of developing communication technology (Karman et al. 2021, 1132). These patterns fundamentally violate multiple *maqâsid al-shariâh* principles: *hifz al-din* (through commodification), *hifz al-nafs* and *hifz al-nasl* (through polarization), as well as *hifz al-aql* (through sensationalization over scholarship). Yet these violations stem not primarily from malicious intent but from structural incentives embedded within digital media markets and platform architecture. Addressing

religious politicization consequently requires attending to these structural drivers: moral exhortation alone proves insufficient when underlying systems structurally incentivize politicization.

### **Religious Symbols in Politics: Leaders Perspectives**

Identity politics in Indonesia demonstrates a high phenomenon related to ethnicity, religion, race, and inter-group relations (SARA), even extending to gender according to SM, one of informants. When social identity is used as a political vehicle, it strengthens social polarization that often creates tension in society. The politicization of religion reveals a deeply contested terrain where sacred texts intersect with democratic politics. It generates divergent interpretations among religious leaders and proffounds dilemmas for ordinary citizens. The interviews with 42 informants across five stakeholder categories revealed three distinct perspectives: moderate critics who condemn textual manipulation, conservative defenders who justify religious symbolism in politics, and a conflicted general public caught between piety and pragmatism.

Moderate religious leaders, predominantly represented by mainstream NU and Muhammadiyah scholars, articulate systematic critiques centered on theological integrity and social cohesion. NUM emphasized that the relationship between religion and state must be maintained harmoniously. He added that using religion as political legitimacy risks reducing the authority of religion itself. This perspective reflects deep anxiety that commodification transforms divine guidance into expedient political ammunition, violating the *maqāsid al-sharīah* principle of *hifz al-dīn*. Among the 42 informants, 16 expressed explicit concerns about decontextualization of Quranic verses, particularly referencing Ahok case in 2016 where Q.S. al-Ma''idah [5]:51 was deliberately extracted from its exegetical context. These moderate voices argued that classical *tafsir* scholarship by Ibn Kathir and al-Qurtubi never interpreted this verse as prohibiting Muslims from electing non-Muslim leaders in constitutional democracies. However, political actors reframed the theological concepts of *walāyah* into electoral prohibitions, using it for political delegitimization purposes.

MCN noted that preachers have crucial responsibility in providing political education. He also emphasized that differences in political choices should be accepted as part of democracy and mitigated by mutual respect while avoiding the spread of hatred. The moderate critique

emphasizes that repeated manipulation erodes public trust in Islamic scholarship itself. The situation then creates cynicism particularly among younger Muslims who begin questioning whether religion serves spiritual guidance or merely political contestation.

Conservative religious figures defended religious symbolism in politics as necessary for preserving Islamic identity. While only 8 of 42 informants explicitly articulated conservative justifications, their influence extends far beyond numerical representation through mass media platforms and organizational networks. These voices invoked the theological principle of *hākimiyah*, asserting that separating religion from politics contradicts fundamental Islamic teachings. This aligns with Alfred Stepan's argument, which proposes the theory of "twin tolerance" in the conduct of state politics. The theory explains the need to combine politics and religion to achieve harmony, enabling a nation to become a democratic state (Stepan 2011, 116).

Conservative informants cited Q.S. al-Māidah [5]:44 to argue that democracy excluding sharia principles remains incomplete. One informant explained that using Quranic principles in political discourse is not manipulation but a constitutional right and religious obligation. This perspective frames identity politics as defensive strategy against perceived secularization, viewing religious mobilization as legitimate political participation rather than exploitation. However, even within conservative circles, nuanced distinctions emerged. Some conservative informants claimed that distorting verses or fabricating fatwas is *harām* (forbidden), recognizing a line between Islamic political consciousness and demagogic manipulation.

This internal differentiation suggests that conservative defenses do not constitute extensive endorsement of all manipulative practices, although practical application remains contested and often depends on partisan political alignments. These conservative opinions reflect the direct influence of the use of symbols and the distortion of religious verses on individual readiness to participate in leadership elections. When they expect personal benefits, they tend to support politicians from their own religious group if they believe those politicians are religious. Conversely, electoral support for non-religious candidates will drop as the number of supporters from the same religious group decreases (Liang & Xiao 2022).

Public's perceptions reveal the most complex terrain, characterized by profound tension between reverence for sacred symbols and awareness

of political manipulation. Analysis demonstrates that public responses reflect diverse religious literacy levels, political exposure, and socioeconomic positions. ASA articulated widespread anxiety that the use of religion as a political commodity can cause division among people. When differences are politicized for electoral interests, they damage unity and increase tensions in an already pluralistic society. Rural informants with limited formal religious education exhibited high vulnerability to religious political discourse. They tended to trust religious authorities without capacity for independent textual verification.

One small trader explained that he believes the *ustadz* when they say a candidate violates Islam, as he has no time to check *tafsir* books. This dependency creates a vulnerability which can be abused by political actors. Messages wrapped in religious language often bypass critical evaluation, particularly when invoking fear of divine punishment or promises of religious merit. As a result, rural communities base their choice of a leader on ambiguous forms, as they have limited access to adequate information. This situation weakens democratic values in Indonesia. Leaders are no longer selected based on competence and leadership qualities, but rather on religious sentiment, as has occurred in Nigeria (Abdullahi 2024, 290).

Urban educated Muslims demonstrated greater critical distance yet faced intense social pressure that constrained public expression. A university student in Bandung reflected feeling uncomfortable when politicians quoted the Quran in debates, experiencing it as manipulative. A civil servant described how questioning religious political arguments in mosque communities leads to being labeled less pious or liberal, causing many to remain silent even when they disagree. The fear of being ostracized as bad Muslims creates self-censorship that allows manipulation to proceed unchallenged. It transforms political choices into tests of religious loyalty where dissent becomes theologically suspect. ATK highlighted that religion is very easily politicized. When brought into politics, it can change rational attitudes into irrational ones, ultimately lowering the quality of politics. Politicians exploit the ignorance and lack of understanding of the community, creating low-cost politics with big impact.

The structural dilemma faced by ordinary citizens manifests in cognitive dissonance between religious intuition and political observation. Many informants expressed internal conflict where faith commands respect for Quranic symbols yet political experience suggests

manipulation. A housewife in Bogor expressed that she knew politicians lie. However, when they hold the Quran and quote verses, part of her feels she must support them. The most significant factor might be the silent majority who feel unqualified to assess theological-political claims. A factory worker who admitted to know less about Islam said, if politicians are right or wrong, he prays and hopes Allah guides them, while also feeling anxious about being deceived. This anxiety-filled uncertainty leaves millions vulnerable to anyone who speaks with religious beliefs regardless of authenticity. EMS stressed that society should realize that differences in political choices are normal in democracy, and excessive fanaticism must be avoided to prevent conflict.

A minority perspective views religious politicization as contingent upon context and actors. TR stated that commodification of religion is not always negative. It has a positive influence depending on who is involved and a relevance to the socio-political situation. A wise approach in using religion as a political commodity can strengthen social cohesion if managed carefully. However, another informant, HN, cautioned that superficial religiosity without substantive application is proven as the most dangerous, noting that politicization of religion will only look religious on the surface. Meanwhile, real teachings such as economic justice and law enforcement are not applied in political practice. This critique points to performative religiosity where politicians deploy Islamic symbols for electoral advantage while ignoring substantive Islamic principles of social justice. Thus, a dichotomy occurs between nationalist Islam and secular nationalism which becomes the basis of the political strategy taken by a political figure to gain higher political influence (Khamdan et al. 2024, 179).

The triangulated analysis reveals that religious politicization constitutes a complex negotiation rather than simple elite manipulation. Moderate concerns about textual integrity reflect genuine theological anxieties, yet their influence remains constrained by limited institutional reach. Conservative justifications resonate with many Muslims who sincerely believe that Islamic values should guide governance. However, this opens space for manipulative exploitation violating the very *maqâsid al-shariâh* principles that these conservatives claim to uphold. Most significantly, the general public's experience reveals structural vulnerability, caught between reverence for sacred symbols and awareness of political manipulation. Addressing religious politicization requires

recognizing legitimate religious concerns and creating safeguards against exploitation. It also includes empowering moderate voices without delegitimizing Islamic political expression. Simultaneously, building religious literacy is needed to distinguish authentic Islamic discourse from opportunistic weaponization.

The success of Indonesia's 2024 General Election, as noted by AT, demonstrates that maintaining harmony remains possible. YCS was reminded of the importance of moral leaders who can avoid pragmatic practices and direct the nation towards progress. These insights suggest that Indonesia's indigenous traditions of *gotong royong*, *guyub*, and *rukun* provide cultural resources for mediating these tensions if systematically cultivated through political education and moral leadership. In general, the various views expressed by religious figures regarding the use of religious symbols in politics illustrate how the formation of Indonesian nationalism is greatly influenced by religious values as the foundation of its identity (Nurdiansyah 2024, 299).

### **The Quran as Political Commodity in Indonesia's Religious Landscape**

The political commodity of the Quran as a religious text still plays a convincing role in Indonesian Muslim society to date, either in economic, social, cultural, or legal aspects (Karman et al. 2021, 2024). The Quran as a sacred text should be used as a guideline for the welfare of humanity. However, people use it instead as a political tool to support one's sect, beliefs and lust for power (Firdaus 2022). This proves Kristianto that the development of religion in a country is not because of its religiosity, but because religious symbols are used for political and business interests (Kristianto 2019, 257). This article also strengthens the view Najiburrohman that in Indonesia there is often politicization of verses and hadiths as religious texts (Najiburrohaman & Habsyi 2024, 190).

In the context of religion, Indonesian society is considered a devout people in upholding the teachings of the Quran. While Islamic teaching aims to be a *rahmatan lil 'alamin* (a mercy to all creation), in reality it is tarnished by its adherents who do not respect the sacredness of the religious texts (Jamaluddin, 2021)A Study Fauzan on the Quran as a cultural product negates the strong relationship between the text of the Quran and its adherents (Fauzan 2015, 190). A similar argument is found in Geertz's study discussing how religious norms are balanced alongside local customs to sustain social harmony (Geertz 1973, 238)

This finding confirms that Indonesian Muslims, known as a religious society, is very thick with culture where the long journey of Islamic history that politicizes religion is difficult to avoid (Ikhsandi et al., 2022). Therefore, a new approach is needed to end the politicization of religion where the Quran is used as a commodity of religious texts (Dzulfikri et al., 2020). The offer of *maqâsid alshâriâh* based on local tradition (local wisdom), for example, provides an opportunity to amputate the practice of politicization in the name of religion. This method is pivotal in addressing contemporary issues holds potential as a basic principle in Islamic law (Pervez, 2016). Turner et al. suggests that the main function of religion is as a reference in social control, political legitimacy, and social cohesion, rather than as a trigger for new conflicts (Turner, 2008).

This article provides insight on how the politicization of religion, particularly through the Quran as a commodity of religious text, can obscure Islam's image and undoubtedly damage its integrity (Munawir, 2020). In fact, Indonesian Muslims provide good behavior as a reflection of the holy text. This is important to prove that the behavior of religious adherents reflects connection with the holy text, highlighting its role as a guidance. This process shows the Quran's relevance and adaptability across temporal and spatial contexts (*sâlihun likulli zamân wa makâن*). The more one believes in the holy book, the better one behaves. If one's behavior is good, then good social harmony will be created. This finding shows that understanding the holy book well and correctly will give rise to spiritual values which will ultimately create good behavior in the nation and state (Yohanes & Yuliawati, 2022).

This article confirms the need for strategic steps to raise awareness among Indonesian Muslims who still exploit religion, especially the Quran, as a political commodity (Solechan et al. 2024). The *maqâsid alshâriâh* approach and a comprehensive understanding of religious texts are needed to prevent the misuse and politicization of religion (Abdillah, 2013). Further research is needed to understand how the dangers of politicizing sacred text commodities and avoiding tensions between religious communities. In addition, policymakers can design interventions that respect the holy book while promoting a friendly and compassionate Islam as a religious principle. Collaboration between religious figures, politicians, traditional leaders, communities, and policymakers can produce inclusive solutions to maintain a conducive and harmonious life

between the Indonesian Muslims and other religions' adherents. This step is not only for the Indonesian Muslim community, but also provides a model for other Muslim communities around the world facing similar challenges.

### Conclusion

This study reveals that the politicization of religion in Indonesia particularly through the commodification of the Quran reflects a deep structural entanglement between faith, power, and culture. The Quran, which should serve as a moral and spiritual guide, has been repeatedly instrumentalized as a political and economic commodity, distorting its sacred meaning and eroding public trust in religion. This phenomenon demonstrates how selective interpretation and symbolic manipulation of Quranic verses function as tools of legitimacy and social control. These practices often undermine unity, justice, and rational discourse. Through the lens of *maqâsid al-shariâh*, such practices violate the preservation of religion, intellect, and social order, leading to polarization and moral decay. This study also underscores the resilience of Indonesia's local wisdom of *gotong royong*, *guyub*, and *rukun* as vital cultural counterweights capable of restoring integrity to religious life. A critical synthesis of scriptural fidelity, ethical governance, and political education is essential to resist instrumentalization and reassert Islam's role as a force for compassion, justice, and social harmony. Ultimately, the Quran's true sanctity lies not in its politicization, but in its embodiment through human conduct that reflects divine mercy and communal coexistence.

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