

Association of political candidates and ulamas during the 2019 election on Twitter

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Abstract This article explores how Indonesian political actors associate themselves with Ulamas through Twitter visual messages to symbolise Islamic piety during the Indonesian Presidential Election 2019. Despite past political events, socio-political dynamics are still relevant to understanding the current political climate. This article employed a qualitative approach by observing and analysing messages from @jokowi, the official account of the elected President, during the political contestation period. Specifically, multimodal analysis was used to examine visual data. We conclude that Islamic piety symbolisms were strategically used as a political instrument during the Election. Political actors, such as Jokowi, associated themselves with Islamic piety symbols and other Islamic cultural attributes to construct a certain strong image and appeal to the Indonesian Muslim voters. An association with Islamic piety symbols could boost his image and appeal to voters.

Keywords: Islamic piety symbols; multimodal analysis; political actor; visual message

INTRODUCTION

As a country with a significant Muslim population, contestants in the Indonesian General Election must consider projecting certain political messages. One way to boost Politicians' image is by being perceived as being close to the Ulamas. Various studies have revealed Ulamas' significant role in Muslim societies, not only in the religious spheres but also in socio-political, including those who become candidates in the Indonesian Presidential Elections in 2019 (Faizin, 2017a; Pribadi, 2014; Wadipalapa, 2021). For example, Hasan discussed the contribution of Kyai Haji Muhammad Hashim Ash'ari, the founder of *Nahdlatul Ulamas*, in social and politics through *Fiqh al-Siyâsah al-Ijtimâ'iyah*. Hasan expounded on how Kyai Ash'ari's ideas on Islamic law and politics influenced Indonesian Muslims, particularly in Nahdlatul Ulamas, the largest Islamic organisation in Indonesia (Hasan, 2021).

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Ulamas play a multifaceted role in Muslim communities. They are both religious scholars who teach Islamic knowledge in educational institutions and active agents in socio-political transformations (Ja'far et al., 2022). This study's findings have important implications for understanding the role of Ulamas in Muslim societies, particularly in Indonesia, as it highlights Ulamas's important contributions to social and political roles beyond their traditional role as religious scholars.

The 2019 Indonesian General Election had two pairs of candidates for President and Vice President seats, which are Joko Widodo – Kyai Haji Maruf Amin and Prabowo Subianto – Sandiaga Uno. Joko Widodo – Kyai Haji Maruf Amin emerged as winners of the political contest determined by the Indonesian General Election Commission. It was a moment in the Indonesian General Elections where the elected Vice President was an Islamic scholar.

During the contestation, the two pairs made Islamic piety a political instrument to gain political victory by associating political messages with language that expresses Islamic piety. Particularly, the @jokowi Twitter account associates its political messages as political symbols with Islamic religious symbols, which in this context is Ulamas or Muslim Scholar. Ulamas, as leaders of the people, are not attached to religious institutions. Religious authority in Islam is not connected to religious institutions but to individuals based on their knowledge and literacy in Islamic studies (Solahudin, 2008; Solahudin & Fakhrurroji, 2020). Indonesian Muslims use various terms to refer to scholars other than Ulama, such as Kyai, *Tuan Guru*, *Shaykh*, *Buya*, *Ustadz*, *Ajengan*, and many more. In Islam, Kyai is the leader in the Islamic boarding education system or *Pesantren*. In various *Pesantrens*, Kyai teaches Al-Qur'an and other accompanying Books.

For many Muslims, Kyai is a charismatic figure (Kudaeri, 2003). Muslims respect and listen to their advice, including political choices (Hannan & Abdillah, 2019; Husein, 2018; Nofiaturrehman, 2014). This relationship implies that the Ulamas in Indonesia have prominent roles in religious, social, and political activities. Many studies have given empirical evidence of the Kyai's social and political roles in political contests (Al-Islah & Haidar, 2014; Faizin, 2017b; Hannan & Abdillah, 2019; Hasanah, 2013; Husein, 2018; Syam, 2010; Wafa, 2012). One of the competition in the Election is gaining political support from Muslim voters (Nasir, 2015; Turmudi, 2008), which is also joined by non-Islamic parties (Rahmah & Maimun, 2018).

This condition prompts political actors to project an image as candidates with close ties with the Ulamas, including Kyai. Particularly in political campaigns, the Ulamas are highly valuable, especially in areas considered a *Santri* community. *Santri* is a term to refer to Muslims who wholeheartedly study and practice Islam (Geertz, 1960, 1992).

The 2019 Presidential Candidates try to appear close to Kyai and show their close relationship through various communication channels,

such as *Twitter*. Various studies have cast Twitter as the medium for political discourse in many countries, both for campaigns and for increasing public participation in political activities (Al-Jenaibi, 2016; Choi & Park, 2013; M. Conover et al., 2011; M. D. Conover et al., 2011; Conway et al., 2015; Gruzd & Roy, 2013; Guerrero-Solé, 2017; Jungherr, 2014, 2016; Lorentzen, 2014; Shapiro & Hemphill, 2017; Small, 2011; Subekti, 2021; Vergeer, 2015; Wengel, 2017). Similarly, Twitter is also used in Indonesia for political activities such as hashtag wars (Fahmi, 2019).

This research seeks to answer the question: "How do Indonesian political actors use visual elements through Twitter to associate themselves with Islamic Symbols?" Although the research was conducted in 2019, the socio-political dynamics of a previous political event remain relevant in understanding subsequent political contests in Indonesia. As the country approaches the 2024 Indonesian General Election, potential candidates have made their Islamic piety visible. This article argues that the trend of associating political symbols with piety symbols is likely to persist as long as the demographic structure of Indonesia places Muslims as a significant voter base capable of deciding election outcomes.

Thus, since religious considerations and practices determine Indonesian voters' political behaviour, political actors in Indonesia should recognise the importance of religious identity as a political tool to appeal to Muslim voters. Furthermore, as piety symbols remain a prevalent strategy in political communication and will continue to shape political contests in Indonesia, political actors who appeal to Muslim voters' religious identity will likely gain a significant advantage.

This paper aims to describe the political act symbol. This research expounded on the dynamics of social and political practices (in this case, the Indonesian General Elections) in a society dominated by a particular religion, Islam (Beta, 2019). Indonesia even has the biggest Muslim population in the world (Studie, 2021). Muslim voters still uphold religious values in social, political, and cultural life, thus determining their political behaviour (Zakina, 2017).

The substantial number of Muslim voters also incites non-Islamic political parties to form ties that accommodate Islamic values and interests. One example is *pengajian* (Islamic learning forum) Al-Hidayah, affiliated with *Golongan Karya* or Golkar party. Al-Hidayah forum supported and secured the win for candidates from the *Golongan Karya* by increasing the number of active forums (Maulana, 2022). Similarly, *Partai Demokrasi Indonesia Perjuangan* or PDIP formed *Baitul Muslimin Indonesia*, which functions as a fundraising and vote-gathering medium.

Political candidates perform information or culture commodification by associating with Islamic piety symbols to appeal more to voters. This phenomenon shows that exchange value is expanding and increasing the attractiveness of transforming use value

into exchange value. As the exchange value of a commodity may increase due to association with other commodities, the logic of association highlights the importance of non-commodified objects to be associated with other commodities. However, the sense of this association creates a reverse process where previously non-commodified entities enter the marketplace, as stated by Crawford. Thus, when this exchange of attributes is absorbed into the already open and indeterminate exchange between commodities and commodities needs, the associations will resonate infinitely (Mosco, 2009).

Muslim communities perceive Ulamas as pious and righteous public figures. Thus, they become a symbol of Islamic piety. All religious followers put a high value on piety. With the assumption that associating something with another thing of value will create added value, Muslim society would favour political products (parties, candidates) associated with Islamic piety symbols. The logic of linking political signs (candidates) with symbols of Islamic piety is a prerequisite for electoral effects.

Commodification tends to be an accepted concept that includes transforming use values into exchange values and the production of goods, codes, and signs (Baudrillard, 1981, 1989; Kellner, 1994). Commodification is not a single process; it has alternatives that are present in public or private lives, face-to-face interaction, or intersubjectivity. In private life, commodification processes include forming identities, friendships, and kinships (Mosco, 2009).

Commodification in private life makes the product of intersubjectivity (language) a commodity that undergoes both material and immaterial commodification processes. In this research, the object studied is the commodification process of immaterial content and meaning in the commodification of piety, which is an intangible commodity that occurs in language use.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative approach, specifically multimodal text analysis, to examine messages posted by the Twitter account of @jokowi. The investigation focused on messages commodifying Islamic piety that could be categorised into different dimensions. During the 2019 Presidential Election, Jokowi differentiated himself from his opponent (Prabowo Subianto) by associating himself with Ulamas of various Islamic denominations, as shown through the visual imagery in his Twitter account. As a presidential candidate, Jokowi presented himself as someone who embraces and values diversity in religious practices.

Multimodal texts utilise multiple modes of semiotic resources to convey meaning. However, this study focused only on visual representation. There are three approaches to conducting multimodal analysis (Serafini, 2015): Perceptual Analytical Perspective (focusing on the denotative content of a visual image or series of pictures in

multimodal text), Structural Analytical Perspectives (focusing on the potential meaning of Multimodal texts constructed by the viewer based on visual grammar) and finally the ideological analytical dimension used in this study.

The following steps were taken to analyse the data in this research: First, the researcher identified images that show Islamic piety. Then, researchers analysed the images by examining the relationship between political candidates' images and viewers' gaze. The relationship includes the distance of the picture (long-shot/close-up), the angle of the shot (from above/bird's eye, below or parallel), and the gaze of the social actor (whether looking at the viewer or not) (Guo, 2010; Kress, 2009; Leeuwen, 1996, 2008).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Figure 1 illustrates how Joko Widodo (@jokowi) associates himself with symbols of the Islamic religion during the Indonesian Presidential Election in 2019. The scholars who were captured in Jokowi's tweets represented differing denomination backgrounds; they are Sheikh Haji Hasyim al-Syarwani Tuan Guru Babussalam Langkat, North Sumatra (documented in Kementerian Sekretariat Negara RI, 2018), Prof. Quraish Shihab, Kyai Salahuddin Wahid (Darul Ulum Islamic Boarding School, Jombang, Jawa Timur Province), Kyai Maimoen Zubair (al-Anwar Islamic Boarding School in Rembang, Jawa Tengah Province), KH Munawir Abdurrohim (Miftahul Huda Al-Azhar Islamic Boarding School, Banjar City, Jawa Barat), Muhammad Zainul Majdi or Tuan Guru Badjang, scholars from among Hadrami (Habib) and Sheikh Muhamad Jaber (brother of Sheikh Ali Jaber).

The Ulamas he visited and presented in his tweets are highly influential in Muslim society, especially for Santri. Kyai Salahuddin Wahid strongly influences Jawa Timur province and Kyai Maimoen Zubair Jawa Tengah. These two Kyai are from the Islamic organisation Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), which has the largest number of congregations in Indonesia. In Jawa Barat Province, Jokowi attended the Halakah Ulamas or Ulama Meeting Forum. Meanwhile, in the North Sumatra area, Jokowi showed a meeting with Sheikh Haji Hasyim al-Syarwani Tuan Guru Babussalam, who is very influential in the area. These are Islamic religious leaders who have social roles in Islamic boarding schools.

These images on his Twitter account show that Jokowi wants to portray himself as a candidate with close ties to the Ulamas with academic backgrounds. He shows his piety by building closeness with Professor Quraish Shihab, who referenced his previous meeting with Jokowi and other religious scholars in a video. Notably, the watermarks on the photos within the video indicate that they are the property of the Bureau of Press, Media, and Information (BPMI) ©2018 and ©2019, which is under the purview of the President's Secretariat in the Ministry of State Secretariat. The video message aims to remind voters during the 2019 Presidential Election that Jokowi is a pious political figure who

aligns his leadership with religious values and principles.



Figure 1. Screenshot of Joko Widodo's (@jokowi) Tweet on 15 April 2019, 2.15 PM, together with the Muslim figure (Kyai Moen), 0:47 seconds (left side image) and 0:49 seconds (right side image) of the video duration is 00:59 seconds—
source: <https://bit.ly/335aZyP>, accessed 21 May, 2019.

Throughout his campaign, Jokowi held important meetings with the Muslim scholars. During the electoral silence period on 15 April 2019, he reaffirmed his closeness with the Ulama, which can be interpreted as an effort to strengthen his association with the symbols of piety. On the same date, he delivered a message in text and video format. In his statement, he emphasised that religion and state are complementary and should not contradict each other. He further explained that while the state protects citizens' right to faith, religion offers divine guidance for people's behaviour. His message sought to assure the public that he recognised the importance of religion and its role in Indonesian society.

The video, "Indonesia Rumah Kita Bersama/Indonesia, Our Home Together" (<https://bit.ly/335aZyP>), was uploaded by Jokowi on his Twitter account. In this video, he highlighted moments of togetherness with religious figures in Indonesia, particularly with Kyai and Habib, descendants of the Prophet Muhammad PBUH, underscoring his close relationship with Muslim scholars. The video showcased his commitment to religious harmony and tolerance, essential to Indonesian society. By featuring his moments of unity with religious figures, including the Kyai and Habib, Jokowi demonstrated his respect for Indonesia's diverse cultural and religious heritage. The video was intended to promote unity and inclusivity, which were crucial for the development and progress of the country. It was a powerful tool for Joko Widodo to connect with the Indonesian people and convey his vision for a harmonious and prosperous nation.

Joko Widodo (@jokowi) displayed his closeness to the symbol of piety when he was captured with Habib Lutfi bin Ali bin Yahya, a scholar from the Hadhramaut community in Pekalongan. Hadhramaut region in Yemen is known for having a significant diaspora, including in Indonesia. In the picture, Jokowi presented himself with attributes common in Islamic boarding schools, such as a black skullcap, a tasbeih, a green turban, and a white shirt. He leaned towards Habib Lutfi and

appeared to be listening to him attentively. This gesture indicated Joko Widodo's respect for religious figures and willingness to learn from them. This may symbolise that Joko Widodo wants to demonstrate his commitment to promoting unity and religious harmony in Indonesia.

Joko Widodo's body language, leaning towards the Ulamas and listening to their words attentively, reinforces his image as a pious leader. This portrayal of piety was also evident when he met with K.H. Maimoen Zubair. At this time, he also leaned toward him and presented himself as a leader who values the advice of religious scholars. This significance was further emphasised in his message on 24 March 2019, where he stated that following the advice of the Sheik/Ulamas was one of the ways to achieve happiness, using the Javanese phrase "*Nderek kalih Sheik*."

The Javanese expression "*Nderek kalih Sheik*" means "to follow the advice of a Sheik or Ulamas." Joko Widodo emphasised respecting and seeking guidance from religious leaders through this phrase. It aligned with his overall approach of demonstrating his commitment to religious harmony and tolerance, an essential value in Indonesian society. By highlighting his willingness to listen and learn from the Ulamas, Joko Widodo reinforced that he is a leader who values his country's diverse cultural and religious heritage.

The camera angle in the photo between Joko Widodo and Kyai was deliberately set to a close distance, creating a sense of intimacy between the viewer and the object. It suggests that Joko Widodo did not view his audience as distant and foreign but as part of the same community. The vertical shooting angle from an eye-level position indicates no hierarchical relationship between Joko Widodo and the audience; they are equal. Joko Widodo's gaze was focused on the Ulamas rather than the audience, demonstrating that he was not trying to interact with the audience directly but instead allowing them to observe their close relationship. It promoted the idea of unity and harmony between political and religious symbols in Indonesia.

Joko Widodo (@jokowi) showed his proximity to Kyai Moen, a highly influential religious figure among the Nahdliyin Muslim community, especially in Jawa Tengah province. The close relationship between Joko Widodo and Kyai Moen was significant for his political interest in the 2019 Indonesian General Election, as it helped him establish a strong connection with the Muslim community.

In Figure 1 on the left, the Indonesian President was pictured among a group of people. Although the photo was taken from a distance, it is important to note that this does not imply social exclusion. Rather, the photograph captured a moment that highlighted Joko Widodo's active participation in the Muslim or *Santri* community, distinguished by their traditional white clothing and headwear. In this event, Joko Widodo supported Mbah Moen, the leader of the Al-Anwar Islamic boarding school. The photo showed Joko Widodo assisting Mbah Moen by holding onto his arms and helping him walk. This gesture showed that Jokowi

greatly respected and cared for Ulamas and elderly figures like Mbah Moen. Overall, the photograph conveyed a deeper meaning beyond a group of people standing together. It captured a moment of community involvement, religious respect, and intergenerational care.

Moving to Figure 1 on the right, Joko Widodo (@jokowi) stood close to Kyai Moen. In the photograph, Joko Widodo was gazing attentively at Kyai Moen, and his attention was not directed toward the photographer. Meanwhile, Kyai Moen's gaze was fixed on Jokowi, and his right hand tightly gripped Joko Widodo's left hand (@jokowi). The two of them were seated next to each other, and the photograph was taken from a close distance. It emphasised their closeness and familiarity. The shooting technique used was eye level, which suggested that Joko Widodo was on the same level as the other people present at the event, with no sense of hierarchy or distance. However, although he was near the audience, Joko Widodo's attention was directed toward Kyai Moen, indicating that their interaction was the moment's focus. The photograph positioned the reader as a witness to their closeness, allowing us to observe their relationship without being intrusive. It conveyed a sense of intimacy and trust between the two figures, emphasising Joko Widodo's connection to the community and respect for its leaders. Overall, the photograph captured a moment of closeness and mutual respect between Joko Widodo and Kyai Moen.

Joko Widodo (@jokowi) developed close relationships with several prominent figures in the Indonesian Muslim community. One was Kyai Salahuddin Wahid, the leader of the Tebuireng Islamic boarding school and brother of KH Abdurrahman Wahid, who served as the 4th President of the Republic of Indonesia. Kyai Salahuddin Wahid was a respected scholar with significant influence in Jawa Timur Province. He served as the boarding school's caretaker and the *deputy* chairman of the National Human Rights Commission.

Another figure with whom Joko Widodo demonstrated closeness was Sheikh Haji Hasyim al-Syarwani, also known as Tuan Guru. He was a teacher in the Langkat area of North Sumatra. His charismatic presence commanded influence over the local Muslim community, particularly within the Islamic boarding school where he taught. Sheikh Hasyim al-Syarwani was a murshid (spiritual guide) of the *Naqsyabandiah*, which is part of an organisation called *Jam'iyyah Ahli Thariqah al-Mu'tabarah An-Nahdliyah* (NU-Online, 2005).

Joko Widodo also visited Sheikh Hasyim al-Syarwani on December 29, 2018 (Kementerian Sekretariat Negara RI, 2018). Joko Widodo recorded a video of their meeting and shared it as a status update on 15 April 2019. The video reflected the closeness between the two men and emphasised Joko Widodo's respect for Sheikh Hasyim al-Syarwani. To further elaborate on the context, Joko Widodo's gesture of kneeling in front of Sheikh Haji Hasyim al-Syarwani not only emphasised his respect for the Ulamas but also highlighted his willingness to humble himself before those who are knowledgeable in Islam. This gesture was

also significant, demonstrating his recognition of the Ulamas's crucial role in shaping and guiding the Muslim community.

Furthermore, the presence of many Santri from the Babussalam Islamic boarding school wearing white caps showcased the importance of Islamic education and the role of boarding schools in shaping young Muslims in Indonesia. The difference in attire between Joko Widodo and the *Santri* was intentional as it emphasised Joko Widodo's status as a political leader while highlighting the traditional clothing of the *Santri* community. Overall, Joko Widodo's interactions with the Ulamas and the Muslim community in Indonesia showcased his commitment to building relationships with important religious figures and respecting the traditions and values of the Indonesian people.

Joko Widodo (@jokowi) often wore a *kopyah* (*peci/ songkok*) or skullcap in many pictures. The *kopyah* was usually oval-shaped and black, made of velvet. In Indonesia, the *kopyah* is traditionally associated with Muslim worship, especially during prayers. However, its use has expanded to other formal activities, and it is now common to see Muslim communities wearing *kopyahs* at various events. Public figures like Ir. Soekarno and Muhammad Hatta also wore skullcaps during important events, such as reading the Proclamation of Independence of the Republic of Indonesia.

Additionally, the *kopyah* is commonly worn as a formal accessory during government officials' inaugurations. *The use of kopyah is significant as it reflects the integration of Islamic culture into Indonesian society.* It also showcases respect for traditional customs and values in formal settings. Joko Widodo's use of *kopyah* shows his adherence to Islamic practices and respect for Indonesian traditions and customs.

Tuan Guru Sheikh Haji Hasyim al-Syarwani was often seen wearing a white *taqiyah* wrapped with a white *imamah* turban and a white thobe robe – male Muslim clothing commonly worn by Middle Eastern Muslims. In the video, the camera was positioned in a close-up shot, highlighting the details of Sheikh Haji Hasyim's attire. This technique emphasised Joko Widodo's respect for the Ulamas and his close relationship with Sheikh Haji Hasyim al-Syarwani as an influential Muslim scholar. This video aimed to convey to the public that Joko Widodo highly regarded the Ulamas and recognised their important role in shaping the Muslim community. By demonstrating his close relationship with Sheikh Haji Hasyim al-Syarwani, Joko Widodo aimed to show his support for the Ulamas and their teachings.

An attempt was made to build the impression that he was a leader who respected the Ulamas as a representation of Muslims. He respected the Ulamas who had joined the *Halakah* of Ulamas in the Province of Jawa Barat. This informal forum consisted of Islamic boarding school leaders in Jawa Barat Province. Joko Widodo (@jokowi) illustrated his closeness to scholars with charisma and influence on the traditional Islamic boarding school education system and built closeness with scholars with modern educational backgrounds (universities). He

associated his closeness with scholars who had university education backgrounds. He showed it when he visited Prof. Quraish Shihab. Prof. Quraish Shihab was a scholar in the field of Al-Qur'an interpretation and a graduate of al-Azhar-Egypt University.

Moreover, he had symbolic capital as a professor in the field of interpretation, founder, and caretaker of the Bayt Al-Qur'an Islamic boarding school in the South Tangerang area. Joko Widodo showed his respect for the Ulamas. He shows it in the picture below (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Screenshot of Joko Widodo's (@jokowi) Twitter message on 25 January 2019, 1.54 PM, during a visit to Prof. Quraysh Shihab.

Source: <https://bit.ly/3ej6Wpx>, accessed 31 January 2019.

In Figure 2, he could be seen holding an umbrella to cover himself and Professor Quraish Shihab, which conveyed that he was a pious leader who respected the Ulamas and maintained a high position in the structure of Muslim society. Additionally, he showed respect towards Professor Quraish Shihab by referring to him with the honorific title "Professor" and the nickname "Pak." This technique of including honorific titles was commonly known as the *honorification* technique. His message further emphasised his piety by associating himself with the symbol of piety, represented by the Ulamas, particularly Quraish Shihab. This approach of building a close relationship with the Ulamas demonstrated his deep respect towards them.

The shooting position of the two individuals in the picture was at eye level. This angle takes pictures of objects at a height parallel to the

height of the person taking the picture. It indicated that Joko Widodo (@jokowi) presented himself as an egalitarian figure, indicating no hierarchical difference between him and his audience, the viewers on his Twitter account. Despite his fixed gaze on the road, Jokowi's picture showed little interest in or interaction with the public. Instead, he used this opportunity to demonstrate his concern for the Ulamas and their closeness.

Jokowi continued to display his respect for the Ulamas at *Halakah* events and gatherings throughout West Java by performing similar acts, such as holding an umbrella for himself and other participants of the *Halakah* of Ulamas in West Java. These actions showed his respect for the Ulamas and their status in Muslim society (see Joko Widodo's message (@jokowi), on 15 April 2019, 2.15 PM, 0:21 seconds of the video duration 00:59 seconds, <https://bit.ly/335aZyP>). It depicted Joko Widodo (@jokowi) standing in an open area with the Ulamas, surrounded by female students dressed in white clothes and sarongs, with headscarves and red lower garments. A visual analysis of the picture's distance indicated that it was taken from a long-shot distance. Joko Widodo (@jokowi) considered the group of *Santri* (students at Islamic boarding schools) important as a community rather than individuals. It was different when he took pictures of individuals he considered symbols of piety, as those shots were often taken from a close distance. He stood out by using an umbrella in the open area with the Ulamas. The image was captured from a medium shot distance, emphasising his closeness to the symbols of piety associated with political symbols. The presence of one person wearing an umbrella among many people not wearing an umbrella attracted the crowd's attention. Joko Widodo held the umbrella for himself and others, showing he was part of the *Santri* community. Through this act, he built constructions close to the symbols of piety.

His Twitter message showed that he had also been honoured by a Muslim leader, namely KH. Munawir Abdurrohman (Miftahul Huda Islamic Boarding School al-Azhar Citangkolo, Langensari). The form of respect that had been done was to give a *turban* to Joko Widodo. He was wearing a black skullcap. Meanwhile, the Islamic boarding school leader wore a *taqiyah* cap and a white turban. Using photo-taking techniques, Joko Widodo (@jokowi) had constructed himself as a pious leader through closeness to the Ulamas. He displayed a medium close-up photo (from the waist up). This technique is displayed in detail, emphasising Joko Widodo. Joko Widodo's relationship with the viewer appears through taking photos from an eye-level angle. It showed its position parallel to the viewer. Meanwhile, the leadership of the Islamic boarding school gave the turban from behind so that it would not attract the viewer's attention. It was a sign that he was close to the students, Islamic boarding schools, and Ulamas.

Joko Widodo (@jokowi) also constructed a pious leader through an image association that depicted his closeness to Habib Muhammad Luthfi

bin Yahya. It re-emphasised the visual message, constructing intimacy with the Ulamas (Habib Muhammad Luthfi). Habib Muhammad Luthfi had been presented with a different look from the previous look. He had worn a robe and a green turban and had worn an imam's turban. The attributes were typical attributes of Middle Eastern countries.

Joko Widodo used the image association technique to construct a visual narrative of his closeness to Habib Muhammad Luthfi bin Yahya, a respected Islamic figure in Indonesia. By showcasing this image, Joko Widodo conveyed to the public that he was close to the Ulamas and deeply understood Muslim culture and values.

Habib Muhammad Luthfi's attire had been carefully selected to emphasise his position as an influential Islamic leader. The robe, green turban, and imam's turban were typical attributes of Middle Eastern countries, which added an air of authenticity to the image. It also reinforced the message that Joko Widodo was a leader who respected Islamic values and embraced them wholeheartedly. Overall, Joko Widodo's image association effectively constructed a narrative of his relationship with the Ulamas, particularly Habib Muhammad Luthfi bin Yahya. The attention to detail had helped to reinforce the message of his respect for Muslim culture and values, which the public had well received.

Joko Widodo (@jokowi) had shown he was a leader close to the Ulamas. He had visually demonstrated that he had walked with Muhammad Luthfi bin Yahya (from Pekalongan, Central Java Province) by taking Muhammad Luthfi's left hand. There had been two moments of closeness to Muhammad Luthfi. It shows that Habib Muhammad Luthfi had an important role for him in the political context of that time. Muhammad Luthfi bin Yahya was a charismatic cleric with many followers, a Nahdlatul Ulamas administrator, and chairman of the *Ahlu Thariqah al-Mu'tabarah an Nahdiah Jam'iyah*. Joko Widodo had recognised his importance in the Muslim community and had strategically used their relationship to further his political goals through his closeness.

The use of visual representation had been a tool in emphasising their closeness. By taking Muhammad Luthfi's left hand, Joko Widodo conveyed a message of respect to the Ulamas. It had helped to build trust and support among the Muslim community, which had been crucial for his political success. Overall, Joko Widodo demonstrated that he was a leader who respected the Ulamas and deeply understood Islamic culture and values. His relationship with Muhammad Luthfi had been a strategic move to gain support from the Muslim community and had been an effective tool in achieving his political goals (Tirto, 2021).

He had shown himself as a pious leader by associating with the Ulamas, becoming a symbol of piety. Joko Widodo had presented his piety by appearing with a group of Santri, wearing a sarong and skullcap. He had complimented his attire with a formal black suit jacket and a red and white pin on his lapel. The sarong had been a symbol and cultural attribute of the *Santri* group, often called the "*kaum sarungan*" (Sarong

outfit community)." Muslim groups usually use sarongs when carrying out prayers or Islamic religious activities. Joko Widodo demonstrated his respect and understanding of Islamic culture and values by wearing a sarong.

Combining the sarong and the formal black suit jacket was a strategic move to appeal to traditional and modern Muslim communities. Joko Widodo had shown that he respected Islamic culture and values and could adapt to modern times. Joko Widodo effectively used his attire to convey a message of piety and respect for Islamic culture and values. His association with the Ulama and the *Santri* group had helped him to build trust and support among the Muslim community, which had been crucial for his political success.

Joko Widodo's identity as a leader who respected and was close to the Ulama was represented in the past through figures such as Muhamad Jaber and Ustaz Yusuf Mansur. Muhamad Jaber was the younger brother of the well-known preacher Syekh Ali Jaber, who was involved in the national movement to guard the fatwa of the Indonesian Ulama Council in 2017 with the 212 movements. Both religious figures wore head coverings that showed attributes of diverse cultural groups, with Sheikh Muhamad Jaber wearing a Turban *Imamah* and Joko Widodo's account wearing a black Indonesian cap.

Joko Widodo appeared in a sarong and skullcap, symbolising the *Santri* group, complemented by a formal black suit jacket and a red and white pin on his lapel. The medium close-up photo was taken at an eye-level angle, emphasising his effort to stand out and be conspicuous to the viewer. His gaze was directed towards Sheikh Muhamad Jaber and Ustaz Yusuf Mansur, showing his interaction with both figures and positioning the viewers as spectators of their closeness and piety.

His meaning-making through photos was to promote equality with others, and Joko Widodo's relationship with the audience was one of equality. The photo's composition aimed to highlight Joko Widodo's identity as a leader who respected and was close to the Ulama, emphasising his commitment to promoting religious values and practices.

The production of messages that associate political and religious symbols is a crucial aspect of the democratic context in Indonesia, a country with a dominant Muslim population, particularly on the island of Java, where most Muslim voters reside. The above findings reveal two significant points.

First, Joko Widodo visited an influential Ulama in Java, where most Muslims reside. These ulama held a strategic position in acquiring votes during the electoral contest. As the Muslim community plays a crucial role in determining the outcome of elections, political actors leverage their position to engage in effective political communication during the 2019 Presidential Election. It highlights how the structure of Muslim society is viewed as a political constituency and a potential market to gain or sustain power. Second, Indonesian Muslim voters pay

attention to religious considerations and Islamic religious values, including reviews for selecting public officials based on the similarity of religion and religious piety.

Implications

The findings of this study hold significant theoretical implications for the field of political communication. Specifically, the results suggest that political actors in Indonesia strategically use their religious identities as a political instrument to gain an advantage in elections. Muslims are a significant market for political actors who use political communication to win their votes. Political communication often involves presenting oneself as being closely aligned with the Ulamas or other symbols of piety, which can increase the perceived religious legitimacy of a political actor. As a result, religious activities have become intertwined with political communication activities, highlighting the close relationship between politics and religion in Islamic societies.

Another implication of using religious identity as a political tool in Indonesia is the practice of Indonesian General Elections. During the campaign, political actors often presented as godly leaders to appeal to the Muslim community. This self-image construction is regulated under Indonesian law on Indonesian General Elections, which defines campaign materials to include self-image. The law requires election contestants to conduct campaign activities that offer their vision, mission, program, and self-image to convince voters. This campaign material includes the self-image of the presidential and vice-presidential Candidates, which can be conveyed orally or in writing to the public.

The Indonesian presidential campaign activities are regulated from the time of the candidates for President and vice president's determination until the start of the electoral silence period, which is a period where election campaign activities are prohibited. The silence period is crucial for three days before the voting day and date, during which any campaign activities are forbidden. The General Election Commission of Indonesia prohibits conveying self-image during the silence period as it is considered one of the campaign materials. However, operationalising the ban on self-image is challenging since self-image is attached to users' language through various media platforms. Self-image, especially as a pious person, is often represented through language. Despite the prohibition on campaign activities during the silence period, political candidates often emphasise their self-image as godly candidates on social media platforms like Twitter. While they cannot campaign explicitly during this period, they subtly use social media platforms to promote their self-image.

CONCLUSION

In Islam, political actors often associate themselves with symbols of piety to project a strong image. One way to highlight collectivism with symbols of Islamic piety is to establish close relationships with the

Ulamas, who are respected scholars of Islam. A common technique to visually represent this proximity is using imagery that conveys three meanings.

Firstly, it highlights the bond between the political symbol and the symbol of piety. The physical closeness of the two symbols represents their close relationship, further reinforcing the message of collectivism. Symbols of piety are frequently seen as important markers of moral principles and religious fidelity in Islamic civilisations. The relevance of these ideals in society and political actors' piety when they align themselves with these symbols is emphasised. It highlights the connection between the political symbol and the religious sign since they both stand for a shared dedication to Islamic ideals and principles.

Secondly, in visual messages, political actors are often portrayed as having cultural attributes like those of the Muslim community. For instance, Muslims often wear specific clothing such as turbans, sarongs, and other items to demonstrate their identity as Muslims. Political actors use such cultural attributes to connect with the Muslim community and establish a shared identity.

Thirdly, political actors also maintain close ties with the Ulamas, who have significant symbolic power within the Muslim community. The charisma of the Ulamas, or Kyai, strongly influences Muslims and can even become a reference for Muslim behaviour, including voting behaviour. As such, political actors often use their proximity to the Ulamas to gain votes during Presidential Elections.

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