The Commodification of Religious Rituals: Representations of Political Actors in Indonesian Elections

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Abstract

Elections in Indonesia are closely linked to religion, with politicians using religion as a medium to appeal to voters. In addition, the increasingly widespread commodification of religious rituals in Indonesian politics confirms that religious symbols in campaigns are still part of democratisation. This research aims to explain how to understand the phenomenon of Islamic religious commodification in the context of democracy in Indonesia, starting from the use of religious symbols, forms of commodification, and their implications. This research uses a descriptive qualitative method to analyse the commodification of religion by three Indonesian politicians running for the Indonesian presidential election 2024. Data was collected from Instagram, with 1,154 posts indicating the commodification of religion. The data was analysed using document searches and experts' views and combined for descriptive analysis. The commodification of religious rituals in Presidential Elections in Indonesia has transformed spiritual values into political interests, using religion to gain support and establish a leadership identity. The three politicians have intertwined religious symbols and relationships with clerics, resulting in Islamic populist ideology and identity politics. This has led to the polarisation of society and the recruitment of politicians for electoral purposes.

Keywords: Commodification, religion, representation, actors, politics.

Introduction

The contestation of leadership elections in Indonesia provides an inseparable link between religion and politics. This condition further positions the importance of religion in influencing voters' decisions. Politicians use religion as a medium to attract voters' attention. This

phenomenon has led to the commodification of religion. Indonesia's majority Muslim population of 237.55 million has always influenced election results (Annur, 2023a).

Furthermore, religious symbols on politicians' attributes are used as commodities that can be exchanged for profit. The essence consumed is not religion itself but the image of religion as a symbol system that works as a label. The image of religion as a label further clarifies the position of religious commodification in the contestation of democracy in Indonesia. The commodification of religion refers to the discourse of interest exchange (Suryana & Handoko, 2023).

The massive use of religious symbols in politics has become a political trend in Indonesia (Nasution et al., 2023). Politicians use religion as a tool to build a brotherhood to gain support. The process of commodification of Islam in Indonesia can be seen from various activities that involve religion in political activities (Nasution et al., 2023; Sembiring et al., 2023). Islamic symbols as political commodities aim to gain a positive image and encourage vote acquisition during General Elections in Indonesia (Sembiring & Nasution, 2024). However, Law No. 7/2017 on General Elections has regulated the prohibition of election participants to conduct campaigns in places of worship, education, and government facilities (Regif et al., 2024). However, the use of religious symbols continues. It is considered more effective than other symbols. Religious symbols can influence people's perceptions, represent religious identity, shape images and potential identities in society. However, it can trigger stereotypes and polarization (Nasution et al., 2023; Kusmanto et al., 2023).

The appeal of the Ministry of Religious Affairs reminds us that the implementation of elections is not a religious area, so religion must be neutral (Sulut.kemenag.go.id, 2023). Religion has always been used as a tool to gain support from politicians. The affirmation is contained in the Quran letter al-Baqarah verse 41, which prohibits the commercialisation or manipulation of Quranic verses in various forms aimed at gaining sympathy from supporters. "And believe in the Book (Quran) which I have revealed, confirming the Book (Torah) which was with you, and do not be the first to disbelieve in it. Moreover, sell not My verses for a cheap price, and fear Me". (Q.S. al-Baqarah: 41).

The practice of commodification of religion in the political realm is used as a tool of political promotion, installing religious symbols in political banners and using ulama as instruments (Batubara & Malik, 2014). Religion, which functions as a moral shaper and a guide to life, has shifted to become a means of exchanging interests in supporting the ambitions of politicians. The 2019 and Jakarta and North Sumatra regional elections were one form of religious commodification that led to identity politics and a polarised society (Nasution et al., 2023; Sembiring et al., 2023). Indonesian society, the majority of which is Muslim, cannot separate religious life. Apart from being a self-identity, religion is also a state identity (Sabrina et al., 2023). This strengthens Islam, in particular, to be a force in building unity (Ode et al., 2023). With this spirit, the commodification of religion comes as a tool to gain a position in democracy on behalf of the representation of religious groups. However, this condition is only a political strategy to support group interests.

The strengthening of religious commodification in Indonesian politics is increasingly widespread in Indonesian society. This confirms that religious symbols in campaigns are still part of the democratisation process in Indonesia (Hasse & Hidayati, 2017). The existence of political parties, the strength of religious groups in influencing political life in Indonesia, and the use of religious symbols, especially Islam, reinforce religion as a political tool. This research reveals how to understand the phenomenon of commodification of Islam in the context of democracy in Indonesia, starting from the use of religious symbols, forms of commodification, and their implications.

Literature Review

The commercialisation of religion is related to various economic, social, and political activities (Amna, 2019). The commercialisation of religion is the transformation of religious values, which used to be a way of life and a source of normative norms based on divine beliefs, into a value exchange whose function is adjusted to the demands of human religion (Suryana & Handoko, 2023). The commercialisation of religion is a conversation about the exchange of interests. Religion and religious symbols can be traded for profit as commodities (Batubara & Malik, 2014). Symbols are one of the factors at work in political communication activities, such as campaigns, advertisements, and speeches, which use the power of symbols and traits associated with political communicators and audiences (Wahid, 2018; Pasaribu & Adhani, 2024).

One of the reasons religion is commodified and subjectified is the issue of religious authenticity. Religion reinforces identity by forging bonds of loyalty and commitment (Mol, 1983; Olsen, 2003). The commercialisation of Islam is an attempt to commercialise Islamic ideals by making Islam and its symbols translatable for profit (Wahid, 2018). Because of this scenario, religion is exploited as a political tool. Politicians utilise the power of Islamic symbols and traits that can instil devotion and dedication in democratic procedures. Religious symbolism in campaigns is still part of the democratic process in Indonesia (Hasse & Hidayati, 2017). The prominent use of Islamic religious symbols in Indonesian elections has reinforced the notion that political elites commodify religion for practical political purposes. However, Islam prohibits religion in practical politics, as stated in Al-Quran Surah Al-Baqarah verse 41.

The 2019 elections in Indonesia demonstrated the commodification of religious identity for political purposes, leading to more significant religious divisions in the country. President Joko Widodo, commonly known as Jokowi, won the election with 55.5 per cent of the vote, mainly due to his support among the Sarungan group of Muslim communities in Central and East Java. On the other hand, his opponent, Prabowo, performed well in areas dominated by the Cingkrangan group, leading to the polarisation of Indonesian Muslim society (Wanto & Sebastian, 2019). Prabowo's campaign was accused of using religion as a divisive tool against Jokowi, mobilising Indonesia's right-wing radical Islamic groups, and laying the groundwork for accusations of "systematic fraud" before the election results were announced (Brooks, 2019).

This commodification of religion in political communication was also observed through the use of language on Twitter by political candidates, where Islamic piety was verbalised to present a pious self-image (Karman et al., 2021). The election results showed a hardening of voting patterns based on religion, ethnicity and geography, worrying Indonesia's multiracial and diverse society (Brooks, 2019). The intertwining of the commodification of religious symbols, the use of new media, and political interests have led to an unholy alliance between religious elites and political entrepreneurs, changing the Islamic landscape in Indonesia and making it impossible for politicians to ignore religious discourse (Akmaliah & Nadzir, 2021).

Methodology

This research uses a qualitative descriptive method that uses qualitative data and is described descriptively. This method is suitable for analysing events, phenomena, or social circumstances. Data collection techniques are obtained from various sources (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The research was conducted by tracing the patterns of representation of religious commodification carried out by the three politicians running for President in Indonesia through Instagram social media. The three politicians were chosen because they are explicitly running for the Indonesian presidential election in 2024.

A total of 1,154 Instagram posts were observed. At the same time, 265 posts indicated the practice of religious commodification. Second, the data was analysed by linking document searches and experts' views. Third, the data obtained were combined for descriptive analysis (Saldana, 2014). Data triangulation involves using data from different times, spaces and people, while researcher triangulation involves multiple researchers collecting or analysing data (Carter et al., 2014).

Results and Discussion
Why is religion important in the commodification of politics in Indonesia?

The majority of Muslims in Indonesia position the importance of religion in various aspects of life, including in choosing leaders. This condition positions the emergence of sectarian politics relevant to Islamic religious identity. This encourages the use of religious issues to be important by using religious symbols. Parties with Islamic ideology take advantage of people's confusion about the orientation of their choices. In the 2024 general election, 5 Islamic parties passed verification out of 18 parties. These Islamic parties include the National Awakening Party (PKB), United Development Party (PPP), Prosperous Justice Party (PKS), Moon Star Party (PBB), National Mandate Party (PAN), Ummat Party, and Gelora Party (Raharjo, 2023). The strategies and issues of Islamic parties in attracting voters by promoting sociology, which is characterised by promoting religious or ethnic similarities in Indonesia.

Islam provides instructions to choose leaders who are of the same faith. This is based on the teachings of the Qur'an in Surah Ali Imron verse 28. With this legal basis, Islam provides strict guidance in choosing leaders. The 2024 elections, which elect leaders, encourage Islamic elites to use religious symbols to gain power rather than purely religious reasons.

> "Let not the believers take the disbelievers as leaders (guardians) by leaving the believers. Whoever does so will surely lose the help of Allah, except for the sake of protecting themselves from something they fear from them. Moreover, Allah warns you against Himself, and you return to Allah alone." (QS: Ali Imron [3]: 28).

Religious involvement in politics is limited to an exchange of interests that pushes beliefs and symbols into something that favours or attracts voters. The three Indonesian presidential candidates are viral. They have used religious symbols to appeal to the majority of Muslim voters in Indonesia. This attempt to shift the focus away from spiritual aspects and prioritise electoral gains can be seen in social media's construction of religious identities. For Indonesians, Instagram has become an essential part of information exchange with 89.15 million users and ranked 4th in the world (Annur, 2023b), including influencing knowledge of its use. Not infrequently, social media has become an ideal medium to represent religious identity. In observing posts on the Instagram social media accounts of the three presidential candidates during January-June 2023, there is an increase in the intensity of posts that use religious attributes, ranging from religious symbols to the involvement of figures or scholars in posts (see Table 1).

Account	Religious Symbols		Religious Leaders/Ulamas	Total	Total Posts
	Skullcap	Clothing, religious rituals (prayers) and places of worship			
@prabowo	26	10	7	43	179
@ganjar	58	36	52	148	723
@anies	24	18	32	74	252

Table 1. Total Posts with Religious Identity

Source: Data processed by the author, 2023

Spiritual experiences are also commoditised, as shown in some of the worship rituals in the post. This turns religious practice into a means of image-building, such as on Islamic holidays. The use of religious symbols of skullcaps is still dominant in representing Muslim identity. This condition is reinforced by the skullcap, which is not only a head covering but also a means of worship and identity for the Indonesian people. This encourages its widespread use. There are a total of 108 posts that use skullcaps. The production of content with religious identity influences audience responses with positive support representing Muslims. The tendency to use religious symbols is seen in the third actor by displaying religious rituals (prayers) as the third actor's post. On the other hand, mosques, Islamic boarding schools, graves of scholars and clothing are an attraction for actors in building Muslim identity. This reinforcement shows the actor's massive efforts to get closer to the ulama and is reinforced by photos of the crowd of Muslims surrounding the actor. This reinforces religion as a political commodity. The high sensitivity of religion and the nature of religious relationships that can shape fraternal identities make the commodification of religion essential and easy to do.

Implications of Using Religious Symbols in Building Spiritual Identity

Religious commodification refers to commercialising religion or turning aspects and symbols of religion into commodities (Hakam et al., 2016) (Rahman, 2016). The political phenomenon that occurs in Indonesia has led to the commodification of religion. Political actors use religious identity for the political process. Politics requires campaigns to create perceptions by interests. The process leads to commodification in constructing campaign content or content/propaganda/support (Ginanjar, 2022). This commodification is done because people also want politicians who are "close" to the social, cultural, ideological, and even religious values of the voters (Wahid, 2016).

The three politicians intensely build spiritual identity by using religious symbols ranging from clothing (White Shirt, Peci, Sarong), visiting religious schools, praying, reciting the Koran, and displaying photos of mosque buildings. Some posts refer to religions other than Islam and Aliran Kepercayaan, but the number could be much higher.

Religious Identity	Details
Religious Symbols	Kopiah, Clothing, cleric, white colour, Visiting tombs, Visiting Islamic boarding schools, praying, Mosque and recitation buildings.
Religious Text	Alhamdulillah, Silaturahmi, Assalamualaikum Insha Allah, Prayer.
Political Ideas	Favouring Islamic education (Boarding school), As an exemplary leadership of the Prophet, Muslims are the key to unity, presidential candidates with ulama, Muslims Unite.

Table 2. Forms of Religious Identity
Source: Data processed by the author, 2023

Religious text often includes "Alhamdulillah, Silaturahmi, Assalamualaikum, Insha Allah, and prayers for safety and hope". The text supports photos that show the identity of a Muslim. Political ideas or Islamic political discourses include "In favour of Islamic education (Pesantren), Imitating the leadership of the Prophet, Muslims are the key to unity, Capres is with Ulama, and Muslims are united". These political ideas emphasise efforts to build relationships with Muslims in Indonesia.

Indonesia has high religious values as one of the aspects of running people's lives. This condition makes general elections synonymous with the election of leaders who reflect certain religious groups and social, cultural and ideological affinities. The doctrine of religious teachings to choose leaders who share the same faith is one of the foundations of an ideal leader. The legal basis of the Quran letter As Sajdah verse 24 is believed to be the attitude of

leaders willing to carry out the mandate. Words, deeds, circumstances, intentions, and provide the best service and devotion in ridhoi ways.

> "We make leaders who guide with Our command as long as they are patient. They always believed in Our verses." Quran Surah As-Sajdah verse 24.

The political constellation in Indonesia then gave rise to the practice of commodification by using religious symbols to construct political campaigns for practical purposes (See Table 3). Religious symbols are used commercially to exploit religious teachings for political marketing, such as using religious figures, clothing, or teachings for political purposes (SJ, 2020). Muslim identity clothing, religious routines such as prayer and pilgrimage, and mosques are some symbols often used to show the value of one's religiosity. Mosques are widely used to show the crowd and the closeness of political actors to the congregation (Nasution et al., 2023). The process then evolved to involve places synonymous with religion, such as pesantren, the burial places of prominent scholars. This process attracted the attention of the public, who responded with comments in favour of the ideal leader representing their group. This condition can be seen from the response to comments posted by the actor on Instagram social media. One of the most dominant ones is, "leaders who take care of the ulama", "leaders who replace the ulama", and "trustworthy leaders". This response appears as part of the actor's efforts to strengthen the position of religious identity. This shifts the focus away from the spiritual aspects and prioritises the commercial benefits that lead to supportive responses.

Religious symbols also lead to commodification practices that target actors' planning to engage religious figures and Islamic community organisations. In the Indonesian context, both are highly influential in building mass sympathy and support. Community organisations such as Nadatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah are used by actors in their positions with various framings. Religious figures such as clerics attract actors to enter the social media timeline. Political actors who seek support from religious figures or organisations to gain legitimacy and support. In Islam, Ulama has privileges based on the Prophet Muhammad's hadith narrated by H.r. Abu Dawud and at-Tirmidzi and the Quran. In Q.s. Al-Mujadalah: 11 people with knowledge will be exalted. Ulama are believed to be the successors of the da'wah of the apostles and have degrees of knowledge. This condition provides a different reception when political actors are close to the ulama, considered a form of support. Political actors take advantage of this situation to include a campaign agenda involving the ulama.

> "Allah elevates those who believe and have knowledge among you by several degrees." (Q.s. Al-Mujadalah: 11).

> "Verily, the scholars are the heirs of the Prophets. And indeed the Prophets did not leave dinars and dirhams, but they left knowledge. So whoever takes it, then he has gained a large share." (H.r. Abu Dawud and At-Tirmidzi).

Using religious symbols ranging from clothing, places of worship, religious leaders, and Islamic community organisations will impact shifting spiritual values. Practices such as exposing religious ritual activities as a form of commodification of religion can lead to a shift in religious values. First, religious artefacts such as mosques, Islamic boarding schools, and graves of scholars will shift their spiritual values and become political commodities in building impression management. Second, the exploitation of religious events such as recitation and commemoration of Islamic holidays shifts into political ceremonial events. This aspect shifts the focus from the spiritual aspect of the event. Religious meaning can turn into a spectacle that is commercialised for political interests. Not a few of these political actors fill various religious event activities shared on the timeline. This encourages the transformation of religious practices into commercialised events. Third, it leads to the manipulation of religious texts to attract support. Religious texts that often appear, such as *Alhamdulillah, Silaturahmi, and Assalamualaikum",* are used by actors as complements in supporting photos. The strong connection between photos and elements of religious symbols and texts is a satisfying attempt

to build positive sentiment. The spiritual experiences of travelling support these efforts, such as going on pilgrimage and visiting historic Mosques.

Commodification of Building Closeness with Islamic Organisations and Clerics

The influence of Islamic community organisations in Indonesia is significant in influencing groups in society. Major organisations in Indonesia, such as Nadatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, are often used as actors to attract support from people affiliated with these two organisations. From attending recitations and celebrating anniversaries to participating in various activities. Surah At-Taubah verse 23 in the Quran emphasises leaders prioritising faith over disbelief. This gives an idea of the ideal leader for Muslims. Proximity to Islamic organisations and scholars indicates that the leader prioritises faith.

> "O you who believe, do not make your fathers and brothers your WALI (leaders/protectors) if they prefer disbelief to faith, and whoever among you makes them a WALI, then they are the wrongdoers." (QS: At-Taubah [9]: 23).

The movement towards Ulama is inseparable from the role of Ulama, which is considered necessary for the life of the community and the ummah. On the other hand, another affirmation refers to a Quranic letter that refers to the Ulama as the chosen people, making this position necessary for building support. The utilisation of politicians approaching the Ulama is a concern for politicians for their political targets. At the same time, this condition can have an impact on the perception of the ideal leader for Muslims. There is a negative impact of shifting relationships that are no longer purely spiritual but rather specific interests. This condition strengthens the transformation of the use value of religion as a source of normative value into a customised exchange value (through ideas, ideas, understanding) rather than religious symbols and then transacted to the public for profit (Batubara & Malik, 2014).

The enormous influence of Ulama in Indonesia covers both religious affairs and social life. Charismatic clerics can determine their followers' decision to vote based on the clerics' advice. This encourages clerical prominence to be used to gain support. In a faith-based society, religious considerations will inevitably enter the political sphere, and political issues will take the form of religious issues (Goldziher, 1981). This puts the Ulama in a position to influence voting decisions. The three politicians strengthened the intensity of the relationship with the Ulama. The posts uploaded show messages of praise and pride in the Ulama. The image of the closeness of the three politicians encourages broad appeal and places the politicians as part of a fraternity under the Ulama.

Implications of the Commodification of Islam: Obscuring the Essence of Spiritual Values

The massive practice of commodification of Islam in Indonesia is inseparable from the development of democracy in Indonesia. The post-2019 general election has led to the polarisation of society (Warburton, 2020). This has a significant impact when politicians use religious approaches to attract support. The strong commodification of religion in Indonesia strengthens Islamic populist ideology in political activities. This impacts the campaign model carried out with the main feature of using identity politics and the emergence of community polarisation. Both put the symbol of Islam as a tool in politics.

Commodification Model	Impact of Commodification
Ideology	Populist Islam
Campaign Model	Identity politics, Community Polarization
Religious Text	Political Arguments, Politician Attributes

Table 3. Commodification Models in Indonesian General Elections
Source: Data processed by the author, 2023

Emerging religious texts strengthen political arguments ranging from policies to political views and become attributes of politicians to strengthen identity. Despite the prohibition of the politicisation of religion, as affirmed in the Qur'an Surah Al-Maidah verse 8, the practice of commodification of religion continues. The affirmation of Islamic teachings clearly states the obligation to be fair, including towards groups that are not favoured.

> "O you who believe, be you who always uphold (the truth) for the sake of Allah, bearing witness with justice. Moreover, let not your hatred of others lead you to be unjust. Be, for justice is nearer to piety. Moreover, fear Allah; surely Allah knows best what you do." QS. Al-Maidah verse 8.

The commodification of religion for political purposes significantly impacts society towards religious values. This condition raises the practice of politicisation that causes the obscuring of religious values. This condition, where religion is used for political or commercial purposes, makes it difficult to distinguish its spiritual essence—for example, the Tabliq Akbar recitation event and religious rituals (congregational prayer). Religious rituals experienced a shift in value, such as the congregational prayer movement used to mobilise the masses at the time and religious holidays that included political elites and religious figures in framing photos of political actors. These conditions allow the spiritual essence to shift and cause the authentic purpose of religion to shift.

> "O you who believe, do not take the disbelievers as WALI (leaders), leaving behind those who believe. Are we going to create a real reason for Allah (to torment you)?" (QS: An Nisa' [4]: 144).

When religion is used as a tool for political commercial gain, it creates division and conflict among different religious groups. This fuels the rise of exclusivism and inclusivism. These groups push the values they believe in away from their essence by seeing the truth based on their group. This also additionally encourages religion to be treated as a commodity or political tool, so it risks being misused for personal or group interests. This condition allows the value of spirituality to shift from the value of one's obedience to religious teachings, to the value of political exchange that reflects the value of religious identity as a commodity. Sociocultural researchers revealed that the strengthening of Islamic populism in Indonesia and the situation during the campaign period in the 2019 presidential election contributed to the practice of commodification of Islam (Kannur, 2021).

The commodification of religion can be detrimental to society, as it can lead to the exploitation of beliefs. Such as using religious beliefs for political purposes, making religion a tool to fulfil political satisfaction. One of them is choosing a leader of the same faith as part of carrying out religious teachings, using clerics to attract political support, using places of worship to build political identity, and using religious arguments to strengthen one's position in society. It is crucial to strengthen the integrity of religious beliefs and practices. The impact of misunderstanding the meaning of religious beliefs and values can lead to the transformation of religious practices into a trend. Morning prayers in congregation, Tabligh Akbar, sunnah prayers in congregation, grave pilgrimages, and mosque pilgrimages are trends used by actors in filling the space of social media platforms. The increase in these trends ahead of the general election is increasing. The three actors play an essential role in the practice of commodification of religion by politicising, commercialising religious symbols, influencing religious values, and desexualising religious practices.

Conclusion

Studies show that the commodification of religious rituals for political purposes for Muslims in Indonesia has transformed spiritual values into political interests. Religion is used to gain support and build leadership identity. The emergence of religious symbols and efforts to build closeness with the ulama strengthened the form of religious commodification. The

commodification carried out by the three politicians has the same pattern, namely tightening religious symbols and building closeness to the ulama. On the other hand, religious texts are used to strengthen the identity of leaders who represent religious groups, political arguments and self-identity. This commodification leads to the populist Islamic ideology used by the three politicians and this condition impacts the emergence of identity politics and community polarisation. Finally, the commodification of religion is used for the recruitment of politicians to gain support for electoral purposes. This condition causes the loss of sacred religious values, reduces the meaning of religion and obscures religious values, and shifts them into commodities. This has a negative impact on society through the exploitation of faith in politics.

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