JPW (Jurnal Politik Walisongo) – Vol 8, No 2 (2026),
ISSN: 2503-3190 (p); 2503-3204 (e)
DOI: 10.21580/jpw.v8i2.33480

JPW
Jurnal Politik Walisongo

Negotiating Religious Norms and Democratic Electoral Pragmatism: Religious Ambivalence of Muslim Village Heads in Contemporary Javanese Villages

Fajar Sodiq Irawan[1*], Moch Nur Ichwan[1], Subaidi[1]

[1] Sunan Kalijaga State Islamic University, Indonesia

Abstract

The daily practices of village democracy are the roots of Indonesian democracy. While existing scholarship has extensively documented the persistence of vote buying in contemporary village democracy, it has paid less attention to the moral-religious frameworks through which political actors interpret and justify such practices. This article examines how religious norms are negotiated in Indonesia's electoral politics. Drawing on qualitative interviews with seven Muslim village heads in Yogyakarta, this study shows that Islamic norms operate unevenly across political contexts. In the governance context, religious values function as an ethical framework that supports transparency, accountability, justice, and public service. In the electoral context, however, these norms are reinterpreted through what this article conceptualizes as a moral compensation mechanism, in which ethically ambiguous vote-buying practices are justified through future-oriented claims of moral redemption in governance. The article develops the concept of context-dependent religiosity to theorize this variation. The findings contribute to debates on religion and politics by demonstrating that religiosity is not a uniform moral constraint but a contextually and strategically interpreted resource.

Keywords: Religion and Politics, Electoral Democracy, Religious Ambivalence

Submitted for possible open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.



[*] Corresponding author email: 20300011011@student.uin-suka.ac.id

Copyright © 2026 JPW (Jurnal Politik Walisongo)

Introduction

The relationship between religion and politics in a democratic society cannot be understood simply as either completely harmonious or completely contradictory. According to Vaubel (2017), religion has historically often served as a source of political legitimacy and an instrument of social unification. In Islamic societies, Lapidus (1996) also shows that the relationship between religion and the state has never been singular, but has varied with historical and institutional contexts. On the one side, religion can provide values that strengthen public morals, encourage political participation, promote accountability, and support government legitimacy. On the other side, many believe that modernization and rationalization of public life will lessen religion's influence in politics. Asad (2003) argues against this view that the line between the "secular" and the "religious" is not natural but a product of history and politics. Therefore, religion still exists in the public sphere, yet its effect on politics is not always straight, steady or the same everywhere.

This inconsistency is important because religion not only serves as a moral guide but can also coexist with political practices that are sometimes problematic. Abdolkarim Soroush (2000), in contraction and expansion (al-qabd wa al-bast), distinguishes between religion as revelation and religion as knowledge, which is always tied to a specific social, historical, and intellectual context. This distinction matters because political actors do not always operate within a single value system. Political actors face competing demands, such as religious moral demands, institutional pressures, electoral interests, societal expectations, and the logic of political competition. Thus, this article follows Soroush's (2000) pragmatic religiosity, which holds that people view religion in terms of final goals, usefulness, and results, whether in this life or after. Within Giddens's (1984) structuration framework, actors' actions always happen in a two-way relationship between agency and the surrounding social structure. Therefore, religiosity is not always a direct control mechanism for behavior. Instead, religiosity can also act as a source of legitimacy, rationalization, and moral justification for political actions.

This article uses the idea of ambivalence to look at this conflict. In this case, ambivalence refers to a situation in which a person or group faces opposing moral expectations at the same time. Ambivalence is not about individual inconsistency; it comes from the complex nature of social life. Giddens (1984) argues that people are not shaped by social structures but also actively work with them and sustain them through daily behavior. In religion and politics, ambivalence occurs when people hold on to their identity and religious values but also take part in political activities that do not fully match those values. According to Soroush (2000), this conflict stems from how religious understanding works. It keeps changing and growing with social and political situations.

Indonesia is a context for examining this issue. As a country with a large Muslim population, Islam holds a strong position as a source of moral legitimacy in public life. Mujani (2007) shows that in this context, Islam and democracy are not always at odds but can coexist in the socio-political practices of Muslim communities. Values such as trustworthiness, justice, deliberation, and welfare are often used to frame leadership, public service, and good

governance. In the context of government, Islamic values can serve as an ethical foundation for transparency, accountability, justice, and a service-oriented approach to the community. However, as Hadiz (2018) points out, Islamic political expression in Indonesia can also operate in the context of populism, identity mobilization, and power interests. Thus, the presence of values does not always result in consistent political behavior across all contexts of political life.

At the same time, many studies on Indonesian democracy show that clientelism and money politics continue to play a major role in election activities. Lay (2012) asserts that local democratization in Indonesia's reform era has allowed more people to take part in politics. It has also created complex power relationships at the local level. In village settings, Hatta (2008) argues that Indonesian democracy is built on village-level traditions. These include dialogue and local social interactions. Eko et al. (2014) also describe villages as sites of governance. Villages have land, authority, local institutions, communities, and resources. As a result, villages are places to study how religion, moral uncertainty, and local democracy connect. Berenschot et al. (2021) find that village head elections can be a place where democracy grows. These elections are still affected by social ties, economic power and local networks. Local politics are often shaped by patronage, informal connections, personal relationships, political middlemen and exchanges of money or goods between candidates and voters. In these situations, support for a candidate is not always based on programs, beliefs or ethics. It is also influenced by bonds, expectations of mutual help, and the real benefits voters hope to gain. This means that elections can happen alongside religious identities.

The coexistence of religiosity and electoral clientelism raises theoretical questions that the academic literature has not fully explored. Research on clientelism in Indonesia, such as Aspinall and Sukmajati (2015), shows that patronage and clientelistic networks play a role in electoral politics. Candidates offer direct material benefits to voters in order to secure their support. This pattern continues, as Aspinall and Berenschot (2019) illustrate, where formal institutions are often pushed aside by a world of personal ties and clientelistic deals. Berenschot et al. (2021) further confirm that money politics survives through patronage systems, social networks, and resource distribution. However, these studies mostly focus on the economic and social aspects of clientelism. They do not closely examine how political actors view the consequences of participating in such practices. On the other hand, studies on Islam and politics such as Mujani (2007) tend to center on whether Islam and democracy can coexist. Meanwhile, Hadiz (2018) highlights how religion is used in political movements. Neither stream of literature sufficiently explains how religiosity operates when political actors are directly confronted with the logic of transactional politics.

Thus, there remains limited understanding of how religious political actors negotiate the tension between Islamic norms and the practical demands of electoral contestation. The crucial question that arises is not only why money politics persists in religious societies, but also how political actors who recognize Islamic values as moral guidelines understand,

rationalize, and justify their involvement in ethically problematic electoral practices. From Soroush's perspective, this issue relates to how understanding religion as a product of knowledge interacts with changing socio-political needs. Meanwhile, through Giddens (1984), this issue can be read as a process where actors negotiate their actions between religious moral structures and the structure of electoral competition.

This article fills the gap by introducing the idea of context-religiosity. This concept derives from Soroush's perspective, which holds that religious norms operate differently in what people believe and how they act, depending on the political setting. In governance, Islamic values can easily serve as an ethical framework because they align with the need for transparency, accountability, service, and public well-being. Jahar (2019), for instance, shows that in Indonesia, Islamic values like sharia are often embedded in government structures in areas such as zakat, waqf, and family law. In elections, however, these values have less influence for several reasons, including competition rules, patronage, resource sharing, and voters' expectations. This contrast matches Giddens' (1984) idea that social behaviors are shaped by the time and place where they happen.

Furthermore, this article uses the concept of the moral compensation mechanism. The moral compensation mechanism is a way political actors justify problematic electoral actions by pointing to future good deeds, especially through public service, village development, and better governance after they gain power. Soroush (2000) explains that religious understanding does not always function as a rigid doctrine, as it may shift with human interpretation. Within this framework, actors do not completely reject religious norms, but also do not fully submit to their normative demands. They negotiate moral contradictions by shifting ethical evaluation from the electoral process to the performance of the government after being elected. In other words, problematic electoral actions are rationalized through moral promises of future public benefits.

Based on interviews with seven Muslim village heads in the Special Region of Yogyakarta, as the actors at the intersection of political leaders, public administrators, and social leaders, this article explores the following research question: How do village heads negotiate Islamic norms in an electoral environment characterized by clientelism and transactional politics?

This article argues that the religiosity of village heads does not operate uniformly across all political situations. In governance, Islam serves as a guide, supporting values such as transparency, accountability, justice, and public service. This view aligns with Mujani (2007), who suggests that Islam in Indonesia can support ideals. In elections, Islamic principles become entangled with clientelism. Village heads must play the political game to win, which often means relying on personal connections and favors. Berenschot et al. (2021) point out that village head elections can be a place where local democracy grows. Still, these elections are always tied to the fight over resources and the web of relationships in the community. This distinction suggests that religiosity cannot be understood as a stable and singular moral variable, but rather as a normative resource whose regulative capacity depends on the

structure and logic of the context in which it operates.

Thus, this article makes three main contributions. First, it expands the study of clientelism by showing that transactional political practices are underpinned not only by structures of patronage and material exchange, but also by moral compensation mechanisms that enable actors to reconcile these practices with their religious identities. Second, it advances the study of religion and politics by showing that religion's effects vary by context and change across political settings. In this regard, it expands Mujani's (2007) discussion of the compatibility of Islam and democracy, while complementing Hadiz's (2018) analysis of Islamic mobilization in Indonesian politics. Third, it adds depth to studies of religious ambivalence by showing how local political actors handle the moral expectations of religion and the practical needs of electoral democracy in their daily political lives. Drawing on Giddens (1984) and Soroush (2000), it shows that religious belief is not a fixed code. Instead, religiosity functions as a normative resource that is shaped and discussed in different social and political situations.

Research Methods

TThis study uses an interpretive qualitative approach to understand how muslim village heads interpret, negotiate, and justify the relationship between Islamic norms and electoral political practices. This interpretive approach is chosen because the study focuses not on quantitatively measuring levels of religiosity or the frequency of clientelistic practices, but on understanding the moral meanings actors attach to their political actions. This aligns with the research design, which positions the study as qualitative and does not aim to make statistical generalizations, but instead to provide an analytical overview of how Islam and the state are conceptualized at the local level.

Fieldwork was conducted in March 2025 and March-April 2026. Primary data were obtained through in-depth semi-structured interviews with seven Muslim village heads in the Special Region of Yogyakarta. The informants were selected because they are recognized by regional and central governments for good village governance and represent a variety of Islamic activism backgrounds, including those from mass organizations, politics, and culture. This diversity helped capture differences in how village heads understand Islam in the context of the state, government, and local socio-political life. Village heads were selected because they occupy a unique position: they are electoral actors who must win political contests, but once elected, they also become public administrators and social leaders. Village heads play more than an administrative role. They are also creators of knowledge. They bring together beliefs, national values, and state ideas into everyday actions. This makes them important figures in society. Their dual role lets researchers see how Islamic norms operate in practice. It shows how these norms change when applied in government settings and during elections, helping understand the real-life impact of ideas in public life.

Interviews were conducted to explore the village heads' experiences during and after the election process. The study captured the village heads' views on money politics and their

understanding of leadership values. It also examined the relationship between morality and local political practices. Primary data came from in-depth interviews with village heads, while secondary data were obtained from village documents, village regulations, village news, and documentation of village activities, allowing exploration of how village heads' religious interpretations relate to governance practices and public policy at the local level.

Data were analyzed thematically by identifying recurring patterns of meaning in informants' narratives. The analysis involved data reduction, categorization, and interpretation; reduction sorted relevant data, while categorization grouped it into analytical themes. In this article, the analysis process moves from identifying empirical themes, such as transparency, trustworthiness, money politics, electoral transactions, and public service, to developing analytical concepts, namely arena-dependent religiosity and moral compensation mechanisms. The interpretation process was then carried out using relevant theoretical perspectives, particularly Soroush's theory of contraction and expansion and Anthony Giddens's theory of structuration, which were also used to interpret the relationship between village head agency, social structure, and religious understanding.

Given the sensitive nature of money politics and transactional practices, this article follows ethical research standards. Informant identities and locations are disguised to protect the safety and well-being of participants. This is crucial because the research examines electoral practices, understandings of religious morality, and the experiences of village heads in local contests, which could pose social and reputational risks if informants' identities were publicly revealed.

Results and Discussions

Religious Ambivalence in Village Politics

The findings show that the religious beliefs of village leaders do not operate the same way in every political situation. Islamic values are seen as a source of morality, but how strongly they influence political decisions depends on the specific situation the village leader faces. This aligns with Soroush's (2000) notion that what operates in social life is not religion as a fixed revelation, but rather human understanding of religion, which is always connected to the social, historical, and political context. In the context of governance, Islam is relatively strong as a framework for public ethics. Values such as trustworthiness, accountability, justice, transparency, service, and welfare are used to give meaning to the duties of leadership and village governance. In practice, village governance is demonstrated through the interpretation of village activities as worship, the use of digital services for transparency, the publication of village financial transactions, and the village head's efforts to maintain the community's trust through an open bureaucracy. However, in the context of electoral contestation, these same values confront the logic of money politics, patronage, voters' material expectations, and competitive pressures. Money politics is often described as a reality of post-reform democratic politics, but village heads interpret it differently, ranging from charity (shodaqoh) and considerations of benefits and harms (maslahah-mafsadah) to the realities of current democracy. These

differences indicate the ambivalence in the village heads' religiosity.

Islam as a Governance Ethic: Transparency, Justice, and Public Service

This study finds that Islamic values have become deeply embedded in how village governance works. Islamic values shape village leaders' decisions. However, this internalization is not manifested through the formalization of sharia, the establishment of exclusive religious regulations, or the dominant use of Islamic symbols in village government structures. It aligns with Asad's (2003) view that the borders between the religious and the secular in a state are not always fixed. Instead, the borders between the religious and the secular are shaped by socio political practices. In the village context, Islam is more present as a source of public ethics that shapes how village heads understand leadership, service, development, and their social responsibilities as government administrators. This also confirms that this study views Islam not only at the ideological level, in the institutionalization of Islam, or in electoral political contestation, but also in the daily practice of governance at the village level.

All informants stated that Islam is understood as a set of moral values that provide guidance for good governance. A leader's success is measured not by how much they display religious symbols in public policy, but by their ability to maintain trust, realize justice, provide good service, and bring benefits to the community. This understanding aligns with Hallaq (2012), who argued that sharia deals with both legal rules and moral and ethical values that guide daily life. In this study, village heads focus on the community's well-being by supporting economic projects and tourism. Religious activities are still seen as important and are recognized, but they often do not receive the largest share of funds. This is because they are viewed as functioning within the community on their own, without needing official support. Thus, Islam operates at the substantive level, not at the level of institutional formalization.

First, Islamic values are evident in interpreting transparency as a trust. The position of village head is not only understood as an administrative mandate from the state or society, but also as a trust that must be held accountable morally and religiously. From Giddens' (1984) view, the village head can be seen as an agent who carries out the rules of the government system. That person also adds new meaning to those rules through the way they act and live in society. Research findings indicate that transparency is realized through digital village services, the publication of village activities, the publication of village financial transactions, and the opening up of space for criticism and suggestions for the community. This understanding fosters awareness that budget management, development implementation, and government decision-making must be carried out openly and honestly. Transparency, in this context, is not only a modern governance procedure but also a religious obligation.

Second, Islamic values are evident in the interpretation of justice as a leadership principle. Village heads understand justice not merely as adherence to the rule of law, but as a leader's ability to treat citizens equally without distinction of social, economic, or political

background, or personal affiliation. In Islamic political thought, justice is a crucial principle of governance and a source of leadership legitimacy (Black, 2011; Hallaq, 2012). Village head A, for example, weighs political costs by considering benefits (maslahah) and harms (mafsadah). However, after being elected, the priority is to fulfill the mandate to act justly so that the community can feel the benefits of leadership more fully. This principle is evident in the distribution of social assistance, development implementation, conflict resolution, and the provision of public services. Justice is understood as the basis for leadership legitimacy as well as a moral measure of a leader's success.

Third, public service is understood as a form of social worship and a means of realizing public welfare. Village government is not merely a bureaucratic arena, but also a space for devotion. This interpretation aligns with the idea that Islam regulates not only the vertical relationship between humans and God, but also horizontal relationships between humans through social responsibility and public welfare (Soroush, 2000; Hallaq, 2012). Village heads use their structural positions to produce a narrative of "development worship"; for example, building a village road is interpreted as a social worship morally equivalent to building a mosque because both benefit the community. Service to the community is therefore seen as part of a moral and religious responsibility. Within this framework, village development, improving residents' welfare, and providing good services are not merely administrative achievements but also ways of fulfilling a mandate and practicing social worship.

These findings suggest that, in governance, Islam serves as an ethical framework that reinforces the principles of good governance. Islamic values provide moral legitimacy for transparency, accountability, justice, and public service. When village heads integrate Islamic values into governance, religion is used as a moral resource to legitimize modern state bureaucratic practices; public service is understood as worship, while state structures continue to be implemented through law and government administration. Thus, in the governance context, religiosity has a relatively strong regulatory capacity because religious values align with the institutional demands of government. However, as seen in the electoral context, this regulatory capacity does not always operate the same way when village heads face the logic of money politics, political costs, and voters' transactional expectations.

Electoral Politics as a Transactional Context

Unlike the governmental context, the electoral contestation context reveals a more transactional political logic. Village heads generally acknowledge that Islam provides moral guidance in political life. However, the practice of village head elections shows that religious norms are not always the dominant factor in shaping candidate strategies or community choices. Within Soroush's (2000) framework, this is understandable because what operates in socio-political life is not religion as a fixed revelation, but rather human understanding of religion that interacts with specific contexts, interests, and social structures. The electoral context has its own mechanisms, pressures, and rationalities that often differ

from religion's normative ideals. Village head elections are a context where village heads experience political realities directly because the community elects them.

One key indication of the limitations of religious values in the electoral context is the persistence of money politics. Nearly all informants acknowledged that money politics contradicts Islamic teachings because it involves bribery, manipulation of political choices, injustice, and abuse of power. State regulations describe money politics as a criminal offence, while fatwas from the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI), Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), and Muhammadiyah declare it haram (prohibited). Normatively, this practice undermines leadership integrity and shifts political orientation from the public interest to transactional relationships. However, in village political practice, money politics persists and is often considered an inseparable part of the contestation process. Research findings identify money politics as a reality of post-reform democratic politics, where public votes can be treated as commodities in a "free market" that obscures the essence of democracy.

The link between money politics, flawed processes, and the potential for corruption after a candidate is elected is evident in the narrative of village head B. He linked the community's demand for money in village head elections to the logic of "*golek ijol*," or seeking returns after someone has secured power. According to him, the electoral process, which requires funding from the outset, can be one of the roots of corruption in government. Money politics is not understood as an individual moral violation but as part of the structure of electoral relations involving candidates and the community. Village head B criticized not only candidates who incur political costs but also the community that uses money as a prerequisite for support. In this logic, money politics creates a cycle: candidates incur costs during the election stage, and after being elected, they are compelled to seek returns through power. Thus, money politics not only undermines the electoral process but can also influence governance orientation after the contest is over.

The persistence of money in politics also stems from competition between candidates. Village head C said that the community doesn't always ask for money. When other candidates start using money, those who don't feel they are missing out on chances to win. Money in politics happens not because of personal morals or the wishes of the candidates, but because the way elections are run pushes people to follow what others are doing. When other candidates use money, those who don't feel they are not as strong. So money in politics is not about giving money, but it is part of "political communication" that shows a candidate is serious about running and can compete in the local area. This idea supports the idea that the election environment has its way of working that can weaken the power of religious values.

At the time, these two cases show the ambivalence of religiosity, the focus of this article. On the one hand, village heads see that money politics is a problem because it can ruin the process, create a "golek ijol" (seeking return) mindset, and leave room for corruption once an office is won. On the other hand, village heads also face the reality of competition that makes it hard to avoid such practices. In this setting, religiosity is not completely gone. Its power to regulate is weakened. Religious values are still

seen as standards, but in the electoral context they must negotiate with competition, voter expectations, and political communication. Conversely, when religious values enter governance, they can be reactivated as ethics through transparency, service and moral responsibility to the community.

Money politics does not exist simply because candidates want to win elections. It is also shaped by how society works and by the political traditions in village communities. In a democracy, Berenschot et al. (2021) found that, even though village head elections can be competitive, they are still shaped by social structures, personal networks and access to money. In some areas, people see giving gifts before elections as a way to show respect or gratitude, or to build a sense of obligation between candidates and voters. In some places, these gifts are accepted and even seen as normal. They have become part of the way politics is done. One Muslim village head described spending as a form of charity or shodaqoh for the community. Another village head thought about it differently, using the ideas of benefit (maslahah) and harms (mafsadah) to justify the spending.

Furthermore, economic factors play a role in keeping money politics alive. In places where people struggle financially, receiving money before an election often feels more real and useful than promises about future plans. A village head said that voters would rather get cash than support the programs because it gives them something they can use right away. They can spend it on what they need. This makes political relationships more practical and transactional. Voters don't always choose based on a candidate's policies, skills or character. Instead, they choose what benefits them. Studies also show that after democracy reforms, many people have not received sufficient political education or social support. As a result, they often see democracy as a chance to pick leaders through voting. In these situations, giving money to voters during elections becomes more common and appears to be part of how people think about elections every day.

Electoral contests are also shaped by logic. Political support is not only about a candidate's moral qualities, leadership skills or religious beliefs, but is also affected by social networks, family connections, favors, emotional bonds and the candidate's ability to obtain and distribute resources. Village head E used the influence of village clerics and religious leaders' networks to win village head elections. These networks were also strengthened by providing access to programs and by carrying out government development projects. Research results also show that funding for politics does not always come from the village head candidate but can include other people, such as political experts or sponsors, who help with the candidate's funding in local races. These results indicate that village elections are not only about the candidate's personal values but also about the social and political environment that offers resources, connections and competition. In this context, political success often depends on the ability to create, manage, and navigate relationships with others.

This way of thinking is clearly seen in the story of village head F, who sees voting support as something that can be traded in politics. He explains:

> *"Kalau saya ya bargaining. Kalau kamu dapat suara dari sini, mau ngasih*

apa ke kalurahan. Saya punya DPT 12.000 yang bisa saya kondisikan ada 9.000. Kalau ada yang masuk entah partai merah, entah hijau, entah apapun ya kita bargaining... Tapi kalau sudah jadi ya jangan lupa dengan kalurahan."

"For me, it's bargaining. If you get votes from here, what will you give to the village? I have a DPT of 12,000, of which I can condition 9,000. If anyone joins, whether it's the red party, the green party, or whatever, we'll bargain... But once it's finalized, don't forget the village." (Interview with village head F, April 17, 2026)

This statement "bargaining" shows that election deals happen not only when people give gifts to voters but also when political and local groups talk together. Votes are seen as something that can be traded for promises, help, or benefits for the village. In this situation, the village leader is not just someone who runs the government, but also someone who can handle local politics and social connections. The way things work is not about representing people's ideas but about exchanging things: votes are discussed in return for promises of help, support or getting something back once the candidate wins.

A similar feeling can be seen in the story of village head G. This person says that in elections a person's own value is often less important than what they can offer. The value offered is more important than the worth of the person running. This idea shows up in the way the village head talks about elections. It is clear that what a candidate brings to the table is more important than who they are as a person. He stated:

"Akhirnya bukan nilai personal yang dijual, tapi nilai tukar yang dijual... Kalau pilihan kades itu, ga pakai uang [semua kandidat tidak menggunakan uang] atau semuanya harus dapat uang [semua kandidat menggunakan uang]. Kalau ada satu yang pakai, yang ga pakai pasti kalah, karena nilai tawar kita masih lebih rendah dibanding nilai tukarnya."

"Ultimately, it's not personal values that are being sold, but exchange value that is being sold... If the village head's election is not to use money [all candidates do not use money], or everyone must receive money [All candidates use money]. If only one uses it, the other will definitely lose, because our bargaining power is still lower than the exchange value." (Interview with village head G, April 17, 2026).

This statement, "nilai tukar," shows that money politics persists not only because candidates lack values but also because the election environment creates a competitive setup where money is seen as an effective way to communicate politically. When other candidates spend money, those who don't feel disadvantaged. Hence, using money in politics is not simply about buying votes; rather, it signals that a candidate is serious, serves as political messaging, and helps a candidate survive a tough electoral race.

At this point, the dominance of logic reveals the limits of Islamic norms' ability to regulate in the electoral context. Islamic norms are still seen as standards, but local politics force them to be negotiated within a logic of political cost-benefit calculations, support networks and voter expectations. Unlike the context where Islamic norms can act as ethics of transparency, trustworthiness and public service, the electoral context places religious values in a more ambiguous position. Actors retain their

identities, but their political actions are shaped by structural pressures that make transactions, bargaining and resource distribution a real part of contestation.

At the local level, political relations are conducted in close, personal terms. Village head candidates do not address voters as anonymous individuals, but as part of long-established social networks formed through family, friendships, community organizations, religious groups, and daily economic activities. This social closeness creates various forms of reciprocal obligations that shape political choices. Research has shown that social narratives within communities can influence political choices, not just money alone. One example that emerged was the issue of money from campaign teams that failed to gain support due to the proliferation of black magic narratives. As a result, political decisions are not always based on program or ideological considerations, but also on social relations, local narratives, and perceptions of immediate benefits.

Thus, the electoral context acts as a stage where interests are exchanged: voters look to candidates for benefits, such as access to development programs, social assistance, job opportunities, or easier services, while candidates seek support by building ties with the community. Politics, then, is not only a way to choose leaders but also a method for bargaining interests between candidates and citizens. From Giddens's (1984) view, this means that political actors are driven not only by moral rules but also by the social structures that shape what they can do. So the electoral context shows the limits of religiosity's control: Islamic norms are still viewed as standards, yet local political practices force actors to negotiate them through the logic of political costs, community support, and social transaction expectations.

From Moral Prohibition to Political Normalization

The clearest sign of religiosity appears when politicians admit that using money in politics is morally wrong, yet they still find ways to explain or justify it. In post-reform democracy, money politics has become part of the political scene. Voters can be treated like goods in a market, which obscures what democracy really means. Many interviewees say that money politics is not ideal and even goes against the law and religious rules. State laws label it an election crime, and religious leaders, including the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI), Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), and Muhammadiyah, say it is haram or forbidden. However, the practice remains difficult to avoid because it has become part of the routine of electoral competition at the village level.

In the contestation for village head, money politics, or buying votes, is not entirely denied as a problem. Instead, it is seen as part of the game that good governance can balance once a person is elected. This is evident in the story of village head A. He considers the costs of politics by weighing the good (maslahah) against the bad (mafsadah). He knows that political costs exist in the race. He thinks they are acceptable if the chance to do good for the community after gaining power is greater. After the election, he demonstrates his honesty through public service, village improvement, hard work, and standing with the community. These actions are presented as proof of his morality.

This system shows that political people do not completely reject rules. They still think that money in politics is unfair. They do not fully follow this moral rule because they have to deal with the real world of politics. For example, in the case of village head B, the costs of being a candidate were seen as part of the work of running for office. Later, these costs were given a religious meaning and called helping the community. This was because the decision to run was first seen as an act of worship. This led to the idea that confusion in the voting process is normal and something that cannot be avoided.

Moral Compensation Mechanism

When political actors admit that money politics is morally problematic, they also find ways to justify or rationalize it. Theoretically, the process can be understood through the concept of moral disengagement. Moral disengagement is a mechanism that allows political actors to recast problematic actions as acceptable. Political actors do this through justification, euphemisms, or claims of a greater purpose (Bandura, 1999). This also helps explain the relationship between guilt and moral compensation, which affects or is affected by it (Renetzky, 2015). In several informants' narratives, money politics is viewed as less than ideal, even potentially sinful, but is considered difficult to avoid because it has become part of the routine of electoral competition. The findings indicate that money politics is understood as a challenge to liberal democracy and the market. This practice is interpreted differently by village heads, including as charity, considerations of benefits (maslahah) and harms (mafsadah), and the current reality of democracy.

This is where a moral compensation mechanism emerges. It operates when an electoral action deemed morally problematic is justified by a commitment to future good deeds. This concept is closely related to the literature on moral self-licensing, which refers to situations where a moral identity, good intentions, or certain good actions allow an individual to tolerate other ethically problematic actions (Merritt et al., 2010). It is also related to compensatory ethics, where people act more ethically after creating or losing moral credentials (Zhong et al., 2010). In the context of village heads, the practice of money politics or electoral transactions is not entirely denied as a moral issue, but is positioned as part of the political process that can be morally compensated through the performance of the government after being elected. Village head A weighs the political costs against considerations of benefits (maslahah) and harms (mafsadah); political costs are recognized as a necessity of the contest, but are considered acceptable because the opportunities for community benefit after taking power are deemed greater. Public service, village development, sincere work and community support are then understood as ways to demonstrate character after a confusing election.

This mechanism shows that political actors do not fully reject norms. They still say that money politics is ethically wrong. They do not fully give in to this moral rule because they have to face the realities of political competition. In the case of village head B, the political costs were initially seen as part of the needs of the contest, but were later given a religious meaning

as charity to the community because the candidacy was first meant as an act of worship. This process shows a kind of rationalization, in which actors change the meaning of problematic actions to fit the moral identity they want to maintain. In the literature on corruption and organizations, unethical practices can become normal when they are repeated, accepted as routine, and rationalized as part of the "rules of the game" that are considered common (Ashforth & Anand 2003). Consequently, a strategy of moral reconciliation emerges: errors or ambiguities in the electoral process are positioned as something that can be compensated for through good governance. In other words, moral evaluation does not stop at the election process but shifts towards the benefits that can be realized after the candidate has secured power.

Analytically, the moral compensation mechanism has several stages. First, people recognize that certain electoral practices have problematic moral dimensions. Second, these practices are normalized as part of the routine or cost of politics. Politics is acknowledged to require funding, particularly because village head elections require candidates to operate within the realities of local competition. Third, actors shift moral evaluation from the election process to post-election performance. At this stage, what matters more is the village head's ability to carry out his mandate, act fairly, and deliver greater benefits to the community after being elected. Fourth, public service and village development are positioned as forms of moral compensation, as government success is understood as evidence that electoral ambiguity can be offset by public welfare. This mechanism is similar to apologetic compensation, which offers something in return (Hayehjelm, 2019).

Thus, the moral compensation mechanism allows actors to maintain their religious identity while simultaneously participating in transactional political practices. This mechanism does not eliminate ambivalence; but rather makes it morally manageable. Village heads are people who stand at the intersection of religious rules, traditions, and government laws. They serve as government representatives, community leaders, and people who try to do the right thing. Village heads don't have to stop being religious. They have to think about how political mistakes in their public job and the chance to make things right through their work in the government fit together. In this context, uncertainty about religion is not a personal mistake but reflects the tension among religious commitment, electoral pressure, and the village's political and social structure.

Context-Dependent Religiosity in Local Politics

The findings show that religiosity in politics does not act as a single moral force. Religiosity in politics works differently in each context, depending on the social and political setting of the people involved. In the governance context, Islamic values become easy to use as ethics because they align with good-governance principles. In the electoral context, the same Islamic values meet the logic of competition, patronage, and political transactions, which reduces the power of Islamic values to regulate.

Religiosity serves different functions in governance and electoral contexts. In the governance context, Islam is seen as a moral framework. Values such as trustworthiness,

justice, transparency, and public welfare serve as guidelines for carrying out government duties. Village heads use Islamic values to guide their accountability to the public. They manage budgets in ways that treat everyone fairly and deliver services as a form of service to the community. They see this service not as a duty but as a form of worship. Village development is not seen as an administrative task. It is also viewed as an act of worship. Even small things, like fixing potholes, are seen as acts of devotion, just as building a mosque is. Improving the village is part of a spiritual purpose. Thus, in the governance context, Islam functions as a public ethic that gives moral meaning to village bureaucratic practices.

However, in the electoral context, the role of religion has shifted. Islam has not completely disappeared, but it is not always able to control political action. When village heads face voter expectations, competitive pressures, money politics, and the logic of patronage, religiosity more often serves as a moral justification. This shift is understandable because local democracy does not take place in a neutral social space. This indicates that post-reform democracy still faces serious challenges, including money politics, inadequate political education, and liberal-market logic that can hijack the essence of democracy. In a broader context, Indonesian democracy is also seen to be in a situation of democratic backsliding, namely the process by which state actors weaken the political institutions that support democracy (Bermeo, 2016; Fossati, 2024). The same pattern is evident in the 2024 election, with various assessments of the decline of Indonesian democracy, as emphasized in the studies by Petlach and Říčanová (2025) and Pepinsky (2025).

This shift is also evident in village head A's narrative. He does not deny that money politics occurs in electoral contests, even understanding it as part of the routine and costs of campaigning. However, this acknowledgment is followed by an attempt to give religious meaning to actions after being elected, namely by working better, helping the community sincerely, and making government performance a form of moral repentance. He stated:

> "*Money politik itu ya menurut saya disadari atau tidak, terjadi, sebagai salah satu biaya kampanye. Kalau saya memahami ya itu bagian dari rutinitas, bagian dari biaya kampanye yang dilakukan. Tapi saya lebih pada setelah jadi, ini harus bisa betul-betul membuktikan bahwa kita bisa bekerja dengan baik, kemudian bisa apa, taubatan nasuhanya dari situ. Artinya lebih baik dari sebelumnya. Jadi kalau itu dosa Insyaallah diampunilah dosa dengan pekerjaan kita ya. Kita bisa buktikan kita bisa membantu masyarakat dengan ikhlas, dengan tenaga kita, dengan pikiran kita, Insyaallah itu bisa diampuni kalau saya seperti itu*."

"In my opinion, political money, whether consciously or not, occurs as a campaign expense. As I understand it, it's part of the routine, part of the campaign costs. But I believe that after it's done, we must truly prove we can work well, and then what can we do? From there, we can repent. Meaning, we can be better than before. So, if it's a sin, God willing, it will be forgiven through our work. We can prove that we can help the community sincerely, with our

energy, with our thoughts. God willing, that can be forgiven if I'm like that." (Interview with village head A, April 17, 2026).

This statement shows that Islam is still a guide, yet it does not always act as a strong rule that stops people from using money in elections. Money politics is still seen as a problem, as shown by the term "campaign costs", which can even be seen as sinful. However, this moral ban can be softened through ideas of repentance, honest effort, and public service after taking office. Thus, religion has not vanished from elections; its role has shifted. It has moved from a rule that should stop actions to a moral system that helps us understand, accept and make up for those actions. In short, this narrative becomes an example of moral justification in village elections.

The move from regulation to moral justification lies at the core of religiousity's ambivalence. Political actors still regard norms as important, but how they are applied remains open to debate. They do not fully turn away from money in politics, nor do they fully let go of Islamic moral commitments. In the case of village head B, political costs are interpreted as charity because the nomination of village head was initially intended as an act of worship. For village head A, political costs are weighed based on the consideration of benefits (maslahah) and harms (mafsadah); what matters most is the ability, after being elected, to carry out the mandate, act justly, and bring greater benefits to the community. Meanwhile, village head E negotiates electoral contests through program support and the legitimacy of village clerics, while village heads C, D, F and G view political financing as a reality of current Indonesian democracy. Thus, problematic electoral actions are not always outright rejected but are rationalized through moral narratives about intentions, benefit (maslahah), service, and responsibility after taking power.

Context Dependent Religiosity as Theoretical Contribution

Based on these findings, this article develops the idea of context-religiosity. This idea holds that religious norms operate differently in different situations. The way religious beliefs are understood and used varies with the political setting. People do not see religiosity as a fixed trait. Instead, it is seen as a tool that people use in different ways depending on their environment. Village heads are positioned within three structures simultaneously: as Muslims bound to religious structures, as public officials bound to state structures, and as community members bound to societal structures. The village heads' actions cannot be read simply as expressions of belief. Instead, they result from negotiations between religious values, state demands, and local social practices.

In the context of governance, religiosity has a regulatory capacity because Islamic norms align with what governments need. Transparency can be seen as trustworthiness. Justice can be seen as a leadership principle. Public service can be seen as worship. The research shows that village heads view digitalization as a means to make governance transparent and accountable. Budget constraints force village governments to choose programs that align with their development visions and missions rather than formal religious activities. This shows that Islam in governance is not always expressed through religious symbols or rules. Instead, it appears in work ethic, intentions, public service, and policy

choices that are best for citizens. In this framework, religious norms and administrative demands are not opposites. They can support each other because both aim for transparency, service, and public welfare.

In the context of elections, religious values operate within a system that requires getting people on board, sharing resources, adapting to what voters want, and working with communities. Money for politics doesn't always come from the people running for village head; some non-candidates, called "botoh", also help fund them. Likewise, people's choices in elections aren't just about money. They also involve stories and beliefs, such as the idea of black magic, which can change how much money matters in a village race. These results show that village elections are not just about plans or religious ideas. They are also about connections, gossip, trust in others, who supports candidates, and how to win. In Indonesia, particularly, studies also show that changes in village systems can be used as tools in power struggles; for instance, changes to the length of a village head's term before the 2024 elections (Noor et al., 2024).

Context-dependent religiosity is an idea that explains why the same people can show strong devotion to Islam in government while still engaging in or allowing flawed electoral practices. It is not simply a mix-up; it stems from how different political settings operate. In the government setting, the rules push village heads to act as workers, budget managers, and trust keepers. In the electoral setting, competition puts village heads in the role of candidates who must win votes, handle political costs, and talk with local groups. Context-dependent religiosity shows that choosing a village head is seen as a risky decision with consequences, so political costs shape how village contests unfold. In this regard, context-dependent religiosity operates in two ways: it can strongly guide governance, but it can also be used to justify choices when people face electoral pressure.

Conclusions

This article shows that village heads' religiosity in Indonesian local politics is ambivalent and depends on the political context in which they operate. In the governance context, Islamic values provide a foundation for public ethics. They support transparency, trustworthiness, justice, service, and the well-being of the people. In the electoral setting, these same values conflict with money politics, patronage, voters' material demands, and the competitive logic of elections. This creates a tension that weakens their ability to guide and regulate behavior.

The concept of context-dependent religiosity explains this variation by showing that religion does not function as a uniform moral system across socio-political contexts. Instead, religion operates within epistemic and practical contexts that vary with the socio-political context in which actors operate. In governance, religiosity tends to be treated as an etic. In electoral contests, religiosity is more often negotiated, rationalized, and used as a source of moral justification.

This article also demonstrates the emergence of a moral compensation mechanism, in which political actors justify problematic electoral practices by committing to do good deeds after taking office. Through this mechanism, actors can maintain their religious identity while participating in

transactional politics. These findings broaden the study of Islam and democracy and enrich the study of clientelism by showing that transactional politics is not only supported by structures of patronage and material exchange but also by processes of moral justification.

The findings in this article have theoretical implications. First, when studying religion and politics, the article shows that religion cannot be seen as a moral force that automatically leads to ethical political action. The impact of religion depends on the political setting in which people are active. Islam is not merely discussed in abstract ideas or through the formal rules of Sharia law. It also appears in the actions of village governance, where religious values, cultural traditions, and government rules meet and interact. This view supports the idea that the connection between Islam and the modern state is not one-size-fits-all. It varies with the situation. Moustafa (2023) shows that the discussion about law, secularism, and the modern state goes beyond simple opposing views. Scott (2021) also shows that the way Islamic law is shaped within governments remains a site where political ideas and constitutional thinking are actively developed.

Second, regarding the study of clientelism, this article shows that money politics and electoral transactions persist not because of economic reasons, patronage, or weak democratic institutions. These practices also remain stable through mechanisms that help actors manage the tension between their religious identity and their involvement in transactional politics. The research findings describe money politics in several ways. Village head B views it as charity. Village head A sees it as a mix of benefits and harms. Village head E sees it as support for programs. Village heads C, D, F, and G see it as part of democracy. This means that clientelism is not based solely on material and institutional factors. It is also based on cultural factors. The moral basis works when actors do not reject norms. Instead, they reinterpret voting practices to fit a framework of intentions, public welfare, or public responsibility after they gain power.

Third, concerning the study of politics in Indonesia, this article shows that village heads occupy a mixed role. They are not merely public administrators but also electoral actors who must win support in a transactional social environment. This mixed role has historical roots in Indonesian village politics. The article shows that during the New Order era, village heads were empowered as state instruments responsible for maintaining order, carrying out village development projects, and explaining authoritarian policies to the community. This history shows that village heads have always existed between state structures and society. In this view, villages are not only administrative units but also socio-political spaces that hold resources, power, governance, local institutions, residents, and local knowledge. Therefore, village heads must balance two demands: the moral duty to govern with trust and the practical duty to survive in political competition.

Therefore, the link between Islam and local politics cannot be explained by saying that Islam either succeeds or fails in politics. These results show that Islam works unevenly: it is powerful as a guide to running a state, yet it is weak when it comes to influencing how people vote. This unevenness forms the core of religiosity, which depends on context. This idea provides a theoretical point by showing that political

religiosity must be examined not only by how strongly people believe, but also by the social and political environment in which religious values are discussed, used, limited, and sometimes justified.

REFERENCE

Asad, T. (2003). Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Ashforth, B. E., & Anand, V. (2003). The normalization of corruption in organizations. Research in Organizational Behavior, 25, 1–52. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0191-3085(03)25001-2

Aspinall, E., & Sukmajati, M. (2015). Politik Uang di Indonesia: Patronase dan Klientelisme pada Pemilu Legislatif 2014. Research Centre for Politics and Government.

Aspinall, E., & Berenschot, W. (2019). Democracy for sale: Elections, clientelism, and the state in Indonesia. Cornell University Press.

Bandura, A. (1999). Moral disengagement in the perpetration of inhumanities. Personality and Social Psychology Review, 3(3), 193–209. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327957pspr0303_3

Bermeo, N. (2016). On democratic backsliding. Journal of Democracy, 27(1), 5–19.

Berenschot, W., Capri, W., & Dhian, D. (2021). A quiet revolution? Village head elections and the democratization of rural Indonesia. Critical Asian Studies, 53(1), 126–146.

Black, A. (2011). History of Islamic Political Thought. Edinburgh University Press.

Eko, S., et al. (2014). Desa Membangun Indonesia. Yogyakarta: Forum Pengembangan Pembaharuan Desa.

Fossati, D. (2024). Illiberal resistance to democratic backsliding: The case of radical political Islam in Indonesia. Democratization, 31(3), 616–637.

Giddens, A. (1984). The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Hadiz, V. R. (2018). Imagine all the people? Mobilising Islamic populism for right-wing politics in Indonesia. Journal of Contemporary Asia, 48(4), 566–583.

Hallaq, W. B. (2012). The Impossible State: Islam, Politics, and Modernity's Moral Predicament. New York: Columbia University Press.

Hatta, M. (2008). Demokrasi Kita: Pikiran-Pikiran tentang Demokrasi dan Kedaulatan Rakyat. Jakarta: Sega Arsy.

Hayenhjelm, Madeleine (2019). Compensation as Moral Repair and as Moral Justification for Risks. Ethics, Politics, and Society 2 (1):33-63.

Jahar, A. S. (2019). Bureaucratizing sharia in modern Indonesia: The case of zakat, waqf and family law. Studia Islamika, 26(2), 207–245.

Lapidus, I. M. (1996). State and religion in Islamic societies. Past & Present, 151, 3–27.

Lay, C. (2012). Democratic transition in local Indonesia: An overview of ten years democracy. Jurnal Ilmu Sosial dan Ilmu Politik, 15(3), 207–219.

Merritt, A. C., Effron, D. A., & Monin, B. (2010). Moral self-licensing: When being good frees us to be bad. Social and Personality Psychology Compass, 4(5), 344–357. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9004.2010.00263.x

Moustafa, T. (2023). Islamic law, secularism, and the modern state: Recasting a scholarly debate. Law & Social Inquiry, 48(2), 713–717.

Mujani, S. (2007). Muslim Demokrat: Islam, Budaya Demokrasi, dan Partisipasi Politik di Indonesia Pasca Orde Baru. Jakarta: Gramedia Pustaka Utama.

Noor, A., et al. (2024). Abuse of authority in utilizing village funds as an effort to win the 2024 presidential election in Indonesia seen from qualitative evidence. Journal of Law, Politic and Humanities, 5(1), 108–122.

Petlach, M., & Říčanová, V. (2025). From people's champion to power consolidator: Examining Jokowi's role in Indonesia's democratic backsliding. Policy Studies.

Renetzky, H. C. (2015). Guilt and moral compensation: relational or self-presentational? Psychology Honors Projects. https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/psychology_honors/35

Scott, R. M. (2021). Recasting Islamic Law: Religion and the Nation State in Egyptian Constitution Making. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Soroush, A. (2000). Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam: Essential Writings of Abdolkarim Soroush. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Vaubel, R. (2017). The making of state religion: Political economy and historical evidence. Critical Research on Religion, 5(1), 9–33.

Zhong, C. B., Ku, G., Lount, R. B., & Murnighan, J. K. (2010). Compensatory ethics. Journal of business ethics, 92(3), 323-339.