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Faith-Based Political Communication in Mandailing Natal's Regional Elections

Anang Anas Azhar¹; Puji Santoso²; Qasem Muhammad³

¹*Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara, Indonesia*

²*Universitas Muhammadiyah Sumatera Utara, Indonesia*

³*Islamic Philosophy, International Institut for Islamic Studies, Iran*

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FAITH-BASED POLITICAL COMMUNICATION IN MANDAILING NATAL'S REGIONAL ELECTIONS

Anang Anas Azhar¹; Puji Santoso²; Qasem Muhammad³

¹Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara, Indonesia

²Universitas Muhammadiyah Sumatera Utara, Indonesia

³Islamic Philosophy, International Institut for Islamic Studies, Iran

¹Correspondence Email: ananganas@uinsu.ac.id

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Abstract

This study examined the role and strategies of ulama in political communication during the regional elections (Pilkada) in Mandailing Natal Regency, Indonesia – a region where religious authority plays a central role in shaping political behavior. This research adopted a qualitative descriptive approach, utilizing in-depth interviews, which were selected purposefully for their active involvement in the local political landscape. Apart from that, observation and documentation were also used as data sources. Data were analyzed thematically using NVivo 12 Plus software. The findings revealed that ulama, as trusted religious figures, conveyed political messages through traditional religious forums such as majelis taklim and Friday sermons, as well as through digital platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook. These messages, rooted in Islamic values, emphasized leadership integrity, justice, and civic responsibility. The ulama's communication strategy, which blended religious authority with cultural symbolism, significantly influences voter perceptions and participation. This study also highlighted the risk of social polarization when the ulama acts as partisan figures. This research contributes to the growing body of literature on religion and politics by offering insights into the symbolic and practical dimensions of faith-based political communication in Muslim-majority contexts. It also underscores the importance of ethical boundaries to ensure that religious leadership strengthens democratic engagement rather than undermining social cohesion.

Keywords: Political Communication; Ulama, Local Elections; Symbolic Interaction; Religious Leadership.



A. Introduction

Indonesia's five-yearly simultaneous regional elections reflect the country's evolving political dynamics and have become a crucial element in the democratic process. These contests often entail significant financial expenditures, which in turn drive candidates and their supporters to employ aggressive strategies in their pursuit of victory. Unfortunately, such competition sometimes results in the use of questionable methods that challenge democratic integrity (Aspinall et al., 2020; Winarni, 2014). Following the political reforms of 1998, Indonesia experienced a major transformation in its democratic system, marked most notably by the introduction of direct elections. This milestone ushered in a new era of participatory democracy, empowering citizens to directly elect not only the president and vice president but also regional leaders, including governors, regents, and mayors. These developments underscore Indonesia's ongoing commitment to promoting an inclusive and participatory democratic system (Baker, 2023; Mietzner, 2020; Nurjaman, 2023; Panuju, 2019).

In this context, the phenomenon of ulama's involvement in political communication during regional elections (Pilkada) emerges as a compelling area of inquiry. Ulama holds considerable influence over the social, cultural, and political life of local communities (Ja'far et al., 2022). As moral authorities, they often provide political guidance, rooted in their status as religious leaders and long-standing emotional and historical ties with the people (Kustiawan et al., 2023; Kartiko et al., 2025). However, this involvement can raise concerns about the politicization of religion—where religious values are appropriated for pragmatic interests—thereby risking the erosion of ulama's role as impartial moral guides. In some cases, their political communication may contribute to societal polarization, especially when the messages they deliver are exclusive or overtly partisan (Ibrahim, 2014; Kadoe & Husein, 2015; Winarni, 2014).

The local elections in Mandailing Natal Regency, North Sumatra, Indonesia, serve as a particularly important case study, representing a critical moment in shaping the region's developmental direction. As an area

with deeply rooted religious and cultural traditions, the electoral process in Mandailing Natal transcends mere political contestation and becomes a reflection of local social values and community dynamics. In this environment, various societal elements participate in the electoral process, but ulama holds a central and strategic role (Ja'far et al., 2022; Sukti et al., 2022; Masdar et al., 2024). They exert significant influence in shaping public opinion and offering moral guidance to voters.

Ulama in Mandailing Natal Regency are positioned not only as spiritual authorities but also as guardians of social cohesion and key influencers of the region's political orientation. During elections, they often function as evaluators of leadership candidates, emphasizing qualities such as integrity, competence, and adherence to Islamic values. Through sermons and religious gatherings, ulama contributes to maintaining electoral harmony, disseminating messages of peace, and promoting civic awareness and responsible participation. In the face of challenges such as money politics and polarization, they consistently remind the community to uphold integrity and reject practices that threaten democratic values.

Despite the strategic role ulama play in the region's social, cultural, and political life, research on their specific contributions to local elections remains limited. Existing studies tend to focus on ulama's role in religious or general social contexts, without thoroughly examining their influence on political awareness, democratic values, and conflict mitigation during electoral processes. Furthermore, little attention has been paid to the practical challenges these leaders face—such as resisting vote-buying practices or navigating political divisions—as well as the strategies they employ to address these challenges. This research gap underscores the importance of further investigation that not only identifies the roles played by the ulama, but also critically assesses their effectiveness in ensuring fair, peaceful, and dignified elections.

The novelty of this research lies in its focused exploration of ulama as strategic actors in political communication during Pilkada. While



previous studies have largely concentrated on candidates' campaign strategies and promises aimed at attracting voter sympathy, this study offers a different perspective by highlighting how respected religious leaders shape public opinion and mobilize support through religiously informed approaches. It positions ulama not just as spiritual figures, but as key communicators whose messages influence electoral behavior.

This research has the potential to contribute meaningfully to the study of political communication, particularly regarding the engagement of ulama in the Mandailing Natal regional elections. It examines how these religious leaders, as informal political actors, utilize social networks, insights into local issues, and religiously grounded communication strategies to influence voter preferences. While the broader literature has explored the relationship between religion and politics in Indonesia, this study narrows its scope to examine ulama as a proactive political communicator. This focus is critical, as ulama play a dual role as spiritual mentors and social influencers, navigating the intersection of religious authority and local political realities.

The urgency of this research is further underscored by the increasing complexity of local political dynamics and the significant role ulama plays within them. In the current democratic climate, ulama are no longer confined to religious domains; they have become influential actors in shaping the political landscape (Tabrani ZA & Murziqin, 2015). By engaging with both traditional and digital media platforms, they effectively disseminate political messages that impact public opinion and decision-making. However, limited research has explored how ulama utilizes these platforms to engage with the public during electoral processes. Therefore, this study is both timely and relevant, offering new insights into the relationship between religious leadership and regional political development in contemporary Indonesia. It aims to provide a deeper understanding of how religion and politics interact at the local level, particularly through the political communication practices of ulama in Mandailing Natal.

B. Method

This study employed a qualitative descriptive method combined with political communication analysis to explore the role of the ulama in the regional head elections (Pilkada) of Mandailing Natal Regency, North Sumatra, Indonesia. The research focused on ulama affiliated with major Islamic organizations such as the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI), Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), and Muhammadiyah, who were actively involved in conveying religious messages and guiding political attitudes in the community during the election period.

Four informants were purposively selected based on their social influence and active involvement in political and community activities related to Pilkada. These included the Chairman of MUI Mandailing Natal, the Chairman of the Ansor Youth Movement, the Secretary of Muhammadiyah's Regional Leadership, and the Chief of Police of Mandailing Natal. Their diverse backgrounds were considered to ensure the representation of both religious and security perspectives relevant to the study objectives.

Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews, direct observation, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews were guided by open-ended questions aligned with the study focus. Each session, lasting 60–90 minutes, allowed participants to share their experiences, strategies, and reflections on ulama's involvement in political communication. Observations were carried out during religious events and public gatherings to better understand the actual practices and settings in which ulama conveyed political messages (Walidin et al., 2015).

Data analysis was carried out using NVivo 12 Plus software to systematically organize, code, and interpret qualitative data. The analysis process began with identifying key terms, repeated phrases, and emerging themes in the transcripts (Hai-Jew, 2019; Salahudin et al., 2020). These themes included ulama's influence on public opinion, communication strategies during Pilkada, and the social impact of their political messaging. The use of NVivo's visualization tools, such as coding matrices and



thematic charts, helped map the patterns and relationships among identified themes.

This study was theoretically grounded in symbolic interaction theory, particularly focusing on how political meanings are formed through religious symbols and social interaction. Through this lens, the research examined how ulama used religious narratives—such as Quranic verses, hadith, and local cultural references—as symbolic tools to influence voter behavior and foster political awareness. The analysis emphasized how these interactions shaped community perceptions of leadership, democratic values, and political participation.

By integrating qualitative methods with symbolic interaction theory and NVivo-based analysis, this study provided an in-depth and structured understanding of ulama's role in shaping political communication at the grassroots level in Mandailing Natal. The methodological approach was suited to capture the symbolic and relational dimensions of ulama-led communication, highlighting their influence as moral authorities within the socio-political landscape of local elections (Walidin et al., 2023).

C. Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings of the study and interprets them in light of the theoretical framework and relevant literature. The results are organized thematically based on data collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis. Using NVivo 12 Plus software, the qualitative data were coded and categorized to identify recurring patterns, communication strategies, and the perceived impact of ulama's political engagement. The discussion that follows connects these findings with George Herbert Mead's symbolic interaction theory and previous studies, while also reflecting on the broader socio-political implications of ulama's role in the democratic process.

1. Results

The results of this study are categorized into three main areas: (1) the political communication patterns of ulama, (2) political communication

strategies, and (3) the impact of ulama's political communication during the *Pilkada* in Mandailing Natal Regency. These themes emerged through the NVivo-based coding process, where recurring ideas and symbolic expressions were categorized and interpreted according to their frequency and contextual meaning within interview transcripts.

a. Political communication patterns of ulama

Ulama in Mandailing Natal played a central role in shaping public opinion and influencing community choices during the *Pilkada*. One primary pattern was interpersonal communication, which involved direct interaction with community members through recitations (*pengajian*), lectures, and informal gatherings. These sessions were used to convey leadership messages aligned with Islamic values and were effective due to the ulama's emotional closeness to the community, making their advice widely accepted.

In addition to interpersonal engagement, ulama used religious forums such as *majelis taklim*, Friday sermons, and social activities to disseminate political messages. These forums emphasized moral criteria for leadership, such as integrity, justice, and dedication to regional development. In the digital era, ulama also utilized social media, local radio, and television to expand their outreach, spread messages of peace, and discourage practices such as money politics and hate speech.

Direct interactions also took place through village visits, traditional deliberation forums, and group discussions, where ulama addressed local concerns while promoting political awareness. Ulama often framed political participation as both a civic duty and a religious obligation. By incorporating Islamic teachings and Mandailing cultural values, ulama served as strategic connectors between the community and electoral candidates.

As stated by H. Mahmuddin Pasaribu, Chairman of MUI Mandailing Natal:



“Ulama in Mandailing Natal played an important role in the local elections by maintaining neutrality and encouraging people to vote based on the candidate’s vision. They are divided into structural ulama, who provide guidance without being directly involved in politics, and non-structural ulama, who support certain candidates but maintain a peaceful atmosphere. Bupati candidates often approached the ulama to attract public sympathy, but the ulama, especially from MUI Mandailing Natal, remained neutral and emphasized the importance of leaders who are close to the people...”.

Similarly, M. Yuna Lubis, Secretary of Muhammadiyah Mandailing Natal, explained:

“Non-structural kiai in Mandailing Natal support election candidates through indirect campaigning and group communication... voters’ participation in Mandailing Natal is still influenced by primordial considerations, with ethnic Mandailing identity significantly shaping voters’ preferences”.

These findings underscore the dominance of religious recitations and *majelis taklim* as influential platforms for political messaging. Figure 1 illustrates the model of ulama political communication developed using NVivo 12 Plus software.

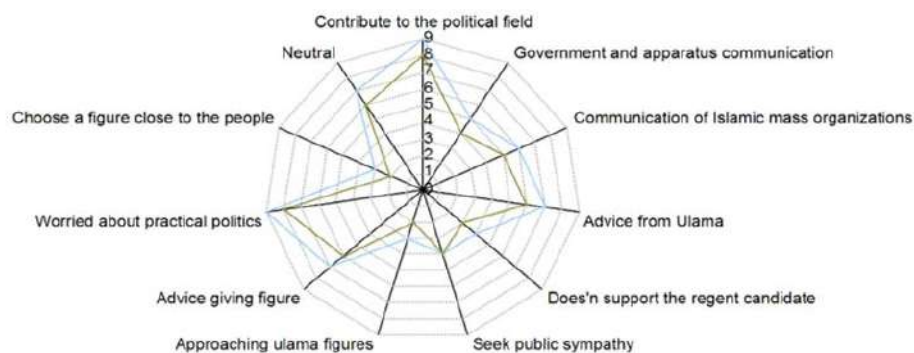


Figure 1. Model of ulama political communication in Mandailing Natal Regency
(Source: Processed by researchers using NVivo 12 Plus)

b. Political communication strategies of ulama

Ulama employed various strategies to maintain their moral authority while effectively delivering political messages. A notable approach was the

use of religious forums such as *pengajian* and *majelis taklim* to indirectly discuss political matters. In these settings, the ulama would stress the importance of choosing leaders with qualities such as honesty, justice, and a vision for community welfare—often quoting Qur'anic verses or *hadith* to support their points.

Samsul Bahri Lubis, Chairman of the Ansor Youth Movement, remarked:

"Recitation in taklim assemblies became the main strategy of the candidate's winning team to attract voters' sympathy... despite a large number of ulama, the atmosphere of the taklim assemblies remained conducive..."

Likewise, Rizaluddin, KNPI Mandailing Natal administrator, noted:

"The unity of the voting community remained solid... due to the important role of ulama in taklim assemblies as a key strategy in delivering political messages implicitly"

Another common strategy was through personal visits to specific groups—such as farmers, fishermen, or elders—where ulama would first listen to community concerns, and then offer tailored political messages. These personal interactions strengthened trust and emotional bonds, making political messages more acceptable. Additionally, ulama used social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp to share faith-based content, such as short video lectures or infographics promoting honest and responsible leadership. These methods were particularly effective in reaching the younger population. Finally, ulama coordinated with the local police to ensure public order. Chief of Police AKBP Horas Tua Silalahi explained:

"In the event of a clash... we conducted negotiations to prevent mass conflict... Dispersing rallies became necessary to avoid provocations. This step was successful and became one of the most effective communication strategies to maintain public order"

c. The impact of ulama political communication

The influence of ulama in the *Pilkada* was reflected in several key impacts. First, ulama shaped voters' perceptions of candidates by

reinforcing the value of religiously aligned leadership. As trusted figures, ulama's views were regarded as credible sources of political guidance, especially in a religiously devout region. Second, the ulama contributed to increased voter participation by encouraging electoral engagement through religious teachings. By framing voting as a religious and civic responsibility, ulama helped reduce voter apathy and abstention. Third, ulama's guidance influenced political opinions not only individually but also within family and community units. In a kinship-based society like Mandailing Natal, ulama endorsements were often followed by entire social circles.

However, the research also revealed a potential negative impact—social polarization. When certain ulama openly supported specific candidates, it occasionally led to division among community members and reduced trust in religious neutrality. NVivo 12 Plus software was used to analyze interview data and identify key themes. The coding results presented in Table 1 summarize the most frequently emerging themes from the data.

Table 1. Key Themes from in-depth interviews in Mandailing Natal Regency

No.	Coding Theme	Mandailing Natal Regional Election	Mandailing Natal Ulama	Ulama Political Communication
1.	Approaching ulama figures	3	2	2
2.	Seek public sympathy	4	4	4
3.	Advice giving figure	7	6	6
4.	Choose a figure close to the people	3	2	2
5.	Neutral	7	6	6
6.	Worried about practical politics	9	8	8
7.	Advice from ulama	7	6	6
8.	Communication	6	5	5

No.	Coding Theme	Mandailing Natal Regional Election	Mandailing Natal Ulama	Ulama Political Communication
9.	of Islamic mass organizations Contribute to the political field	9	8	8
10.	Doesn't support the regent candidate	4	3	3
11.	Government and apparatus communication	5	4	4

Source: Processed by researchers using NVivo 12 Plus

Interview data also showed that while MUI provided moral support to all candidates, their perceived bias raised concerns among community members. *Majelis taklim* activities emerged as a central communication channel used by ulama before and during the election period.

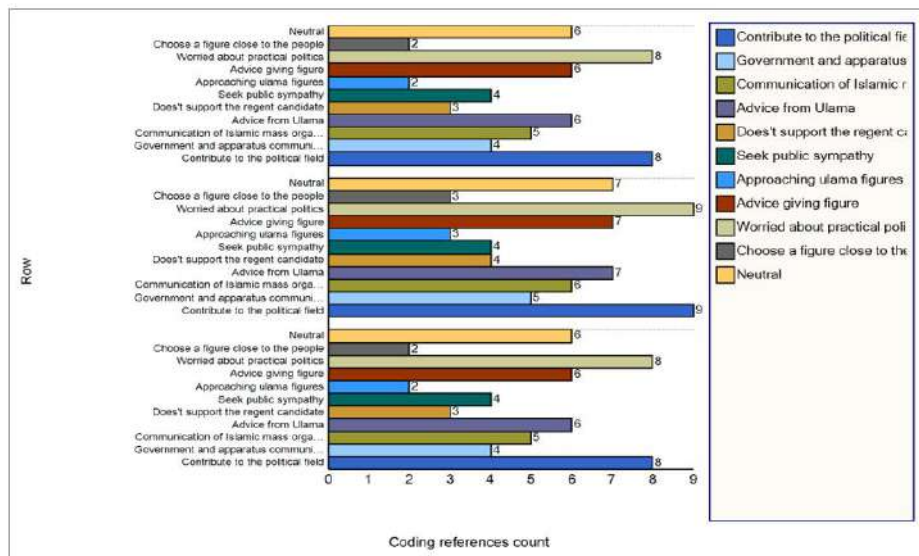


Figure 2. Coding matrix from interview results in Mandailing Natal

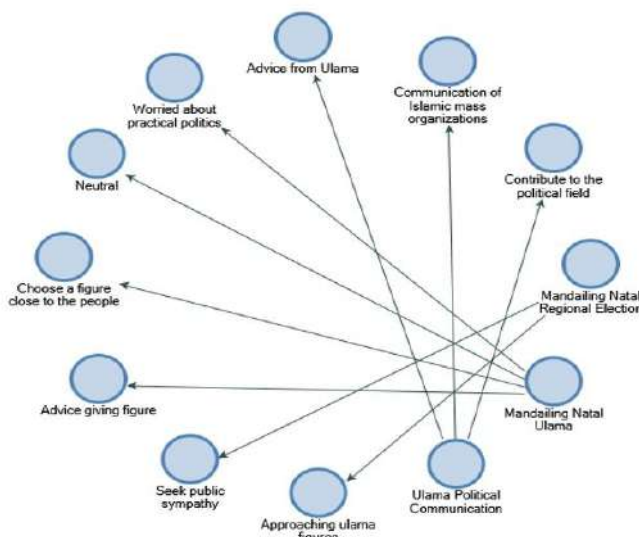


Figure 3. Role of ulama in political communication in Mandailing Natal
Source: Processed by researchers using NVivo 12 Plus

2. Discussion

This study employed George Herbert Mead's symbolic interaction theory to analyze the role of the ulama in political communication during the *Pilkada* in Mandailing Natal Regency. Mead's theoretical framework emphasizes the construction of meaning through social interaction, particularly through symbols. His theory consists of three interrelated components: mind, self, and society—all of which are reflected in the findings of this research.

The concept of "mind" refers to how individuals form meanings and ideas through communicative interaction. In the context of this research, ulama in Mandailing Natal acts as a meaning-maker by framing political narratives in religious language. Through sermons, *pengajian*, and *majelis taklim*, ulama disseminate political values such as justice, integrity, and responsibility—values that are deeply rooted in Islamic teachings. These ideas are gradually internalized by the community through repetitive exposure and reflection. As the ulama consistently communicate messages linking religious values with leadership qualities, the public begins to interpret political participation as an ethical and even spiritual

responsibility (Masdar et al., 2024; Kadir et al., 2024). In this way, the symbolic interaction between the ulama and the community becomes the basis for how voters interpret political choices.

The notion of “self” in Mead’s framework emerges from how individuals define themselves about others. In Mandailing Natal, ulama are not only religious figures but also social and political role models. Their identity as moral authorities contributes to their credibility in the political sphere. Community members perceive them as trustworthy sources of information, and their political recommendations are often followed because of the respect they command. This credibility is further reinforced by the ulama’s perceived consistency in upholding religious and ethical values (Ja’far et al., 2022). As the findings show, the *self* of ulama is constructed through continuous engagement with the community, where they are seen as spiritual guides and, increasingly, as political leaders whose opinions shape electoral preferences.

The third component, “society”, is reflected in how collective meaning is created through shared symbols. In Mandailing Natal, religious gatherings are central to the political communication process. The *majelis taklim* and *pengajian* function not only as spiritual forums but also as venues where political messages are negotiated, shared, and interpreted. The people do not merely receive information from ulama; they actively shape their political consciousness through the moral and religious meanings embedded in those interactions. This aligns with the findings of Susanti and Setiajidi (2022), who noted that ulama’s political messages are most effective when embedded in local religious and cultural values and conveyed through trusted platforms.

The integration of religion into political communication in Mandailing Natal reflects a broader phenomenon observed in other countries with similar socio-religious contexts. For instance, in Malaysia, ulama affiliated with Islamic-based parties such as PAS play an active role in shaping public opinion and legitimizing government policy. They influence not only religious practices but also state decisions on education,



welfare, and governance. Similarly, in Turkey, despite the secular constitution, ulama continues to influence political discourse, particularly in legitimizing parties that align with Islamic values. As Ufen (2009) noted, Islamic symbols and rhetoric in such countries serve as tools for building political legitimacy and public trust.

These parallels underscore the global relevance of this study. The political role of the ulama in Mandailing Natal is not an isolated case but part of a broader pattern where religious leaders serve as mediators between the state and society. The research by Al-Ansi et al. (2019) similarly emphasized that ulama often plays a dual role in guiding both spiritual life and political behavior. In many parts of the Muslim world, this duality enables religious leaders to function as both moral compasses and socio-political agents who influence policy directions, electoral behaviors, and civic values. In societies where religious identity is deeply intertwined with political identity, ulama become critical actors in mobilizing political participation and shaping public discourse (Gani et al., 2024). Their authority is not merely theological but also cultural and symbolic, often rooted in longstanding trust from local communities (Murziqin, & Tabrani, 2017). As such, their political engagement carries significant weight and can either support inclusive democratic processes or, conversely, reinforce sectarian or exclusive narratives if not guided by ethical commitment and pluralistic values (Pratiwi et al., 2023). The implications of this dual role highlight the need for continuous reflection on how religious authority is integrated into modern governance, not only in Indonesia but across diverse democratic contexts where religion remains a vital part of public life.

The role of the ulama as a political communicator is also supported by Rasyidin (2021), who argued that the ulama does not merely transmit information but also generates social meaning that guides public behavior. By connecting religious teachings with contemporary political issues, ulama in Mandailing Natal influences how voters interpret candidates' values, character, and vision. Winarni (2014) further adds that local religious and cultural traditions often override secular influences in determining political

choices. This reinforces the finding that the ulama's religious framing significantly impacts voter decision-making in the region.

However, this integration of religion and politics also poses challenges. One of the critical findings of this study is the emergence of polarization when ulama are perceived to favor particular candidates. While structural ulama affiliated with official institutions such as MUI tend to maintain neutrality, non-structural ulama may implicitly or explicitly support certain political figures (Humaidi & Rahmadanti, 2023). This can create divisions within the community, especially in areas where ethnic and kinship-based political affiliations are still strong. As Afrimadona (2021) and McCoy et al. (2018) warn, the politicization of religious identity may increase sectarian sentiment and weaken the social fabric.

The strategic use of media, both traditional and digital, also characterizes Ulama's communication approach. In addition to *Majelis Taklim*, ulama in Mandailing Natal uses Facebook, WhatsApp, and other platforms to reach a wider audience, especially the youth. These messages often take the form of short videos, infographics, or motivational content anchored in Islamic values. Kubin and von Sikorski (2021) noted that religious figures using digital media can reshape political narratives and influence public behavior more effectively than formal political actors—especially when trust in political institutions is low. This trend aligns with broader global dynamics in which access to digitalized social services and decentralized governance fosters localized forms of authority, including religious authority (Panov et al., 2023). Moreover, in a society increasingly reliant on electronic platforms for civic participation, the ulama's presence in digital media mirrors the transformation of political communication in other multicultural settings such as Nigeria, where intolerance can be mitigated through inclusive religious engagement (Aidonojie et al., 2025).

From a global democratic perspective, the findings from Mandailing Natal demonstrate how faith-based political communication can simultaneously enhance democratic participation and reinforce communal cohesion. This aligns with Jamaa's (2018) research, which



emphasized that the ulama's engagement in local politics fosters political literacy grounded in ethical and religious principles. However, when religious authority is used for overt political mobilization, it risks undermining the inclusive ideals of democracy—especially in multicultural and multi-faith societies. Such tensions mirror broader concerns raised by Nwabueze and Gasiokwu (2024), who advocate for reform in formal systems to accommodate new realities, suggesting that institutional inclusivity must adapt to the pluralistic expressions of authority, including those mediated by religion.

Therefore, the findings of this study contribute to a broader understanding of how religion can serve both as a unifying and divisive force in political processes. On one hand, ulama can inspire ethical leadership, promote civic responsibility, and legitimize democratic institutions. On the other hand, excessive politicization of religious authority can lead to the marginalization of minority voices and the erosion of political neutrality. These dual potentials are not unique to Indonesia but are seen in other diverse societies, where the interplay of religious norms and legal-political frameworks demands constant negotiation to ensure social harmony (Masdar et al., 2024).

At the policy level, these results suggest the importance of developing frameworks that support the constructive engagement of religious leaders in politics without compromising democratic integrity. Government institutions and civil society actors should work collaboratively with religious organizations to ensure that ulama functions as facilitators of inclusive discourse (Zulkarnaini et al., 2024; Lestanata, 2023; Risky et al., 2023). In this regard, Firmandayu and Elfaki (2023) underline that policy structures grounded in ethical and sustainable governance—such as those promoting a “green constitution”—can enhance legitimacy and ensure that religious actors contribute meaningfully to long-term democratic health. This could include training in ethical political communication, promotion of interfaith dialogue, and community-based education that strengthens democratic resilience.

In conclusion, this research highlights the dual nature of ulama's role in local political dynamics. It affirms their capacity to function as effective communicators of political values rooted in faith and culture. At the same time, it calls for careful reflection on the potential risks associated with political partisanship among religious figures. The contribution of this study lies not only in enriching the discourse on religion and politics in Indonesia but also in offering globally relevant insights into the symbolic and strategic dimensions of faith-based political communication in contemporary democratic societies. In addition, the findings affirm the need for judicial and policy reforms that recognize the evolving interface between traditional authorities and modern governance models, especially as decentralized political systems increasingly engage religious stakeholders (Baranyanan et al., 2024).

Building upon the findings above, it is essential to view the role of ulama not merely as communicators of political ethics, but also as strategic actors in the broader framework of democratic maturation. Tabrani ZA and Murziqin (2015) assert that political education is a fundamental element in cultivating a mature democracy in Indonesia, and within this context, ulama serves as influential educators who bridge religious consciousness with civic engagement. Their sermons and teachings provide not only moral guidance but also critical frameworks through which the public learns to navigate political choices with ethical discernment. This aligns with the idea that democracy in Indonesia must be supported by culturally resonant political literacy, a role that the ulama are uniquely positioned to fulfill. Furthermore, as emphasized by Firmandayu and Elfaki (2023), integrating moral and environmental values into governance enhances public trust—a trust that ulama, as moral leaders, are well placed to nurture.

Furthermore, the strategic authority of ulama in political communication cannot be detached from the embedded power structures within local societies. Drawing on the Powercube Theory, Muntasir et al. (2025) emphasize how religious legitimacy and local power relations



intersect in shaping political influence, particularly in regions like Aceh where *dayah* traditions dominate. While the study focuses on Aceh, its relevance extends to Mandailing Natal, where similar dynamics of symbolic authority operate. The ulama in such contexts wields influence not only due to theological knowledge but also through their embeddedness in visible, hidden, and invisible power structures. Their role in political communication, therefore, transcends mere rhetoric and enters the domain of legitimizing political power and reinforcing collective political narratives that align with communal values. This process resonates with how hybrid legal-political authorities operate in decentralized governance, as discussed by Panov et al. (2023).

This strategic positioning is further evident when examining how public figures like Anies Rasyid Baswedan employ religious discourse in political communication. As noted by Lestanata (2023), Anies's success in resonating with diverse communities lies in his ability to intertwine religious symbolism with nationalistic and civic ideals. Such communication patterns mirror how the ulama in Mandailing Natal frames political participation as a moral imperative. These parallels illustrate that religious-based political communication, when grounded in ethical principles and cultural sensitivity, can enhance democratic engagement. However, as with Anies's experience, the challenge remains in maintaining an inclusive narrative that avoids exclusivist overtones or sectarian divides—issues that have been identified in other national contexts, such as Nigeria, where political intolerance has led to rights violations and social unrest (Aidonojie et al., 2025).

By integrating these insights, it becomes evident that the role of the ulama in political communication is part of a larger continuum of democratic development in Indonesia. Their capacity to shape public opinion, foster political ethics, and legitimize authority underscores their importance in both local and national contexts. Yet, as Tabrani ZA and Murziqin (2015) caution, the sustainability of democracy requires continuous political education that nurtures critical thinking, tolerance,

and inclusivity – principles that ulama must also embody in their public engagement. Thus, while their symbolic interaction with society can be a force for democratic consolidation, it must be supported by ethical reflection, structural awareness, and a commitment to pluralistic dialogue. Moreover, policies informed by experiences from legal reform (Nwabueze & Gasiokwu, 2024) and regional administrative compliance (Baranyanan et al., 2024) can further help create an enabling environment for inclusive religious engagement.

In addition, it is crucial to emphasize that the continued role of the ulama in political communication must be directed toward strengthening an inclusive and dignified democratic order. Their position as guardians of public morality is not only valuable in guiding ethical political preferences but also essential in shaping a political culture grounded in social responsibility. In this regard, ulama must continually reflect on their role to avoid becoming entangled in transactional political practices that may erode public trust in religious institutions. As Muntasir et al. (2025) highlights, the religious legitimacy held by ulama constitutes a powerful symbolic capital, yet this power demands ethical governance to prevent unilateral domination or prolonged social polarization. Such a reflection parallels global discussions on the ethics of authority and governance structures in multiethnic societies (Masdar et al., 2024).

Thus, the contribution of ulama to political communication in Mandailing Natal is not merely a local phenomenon but also reflects broader dynamics of how power, religion, and society interact within a democratic framework. This study underscores that symbols, meanings, and religious identities constructed through social interaction significantly influence the political behavior of communities. Therefore, enhancing the capacity of ulama in value-based public communication—as also recommended by Lestanata (2023)—must be accompanied by policies that promote interfaith dialogue, training in ethical-political engagement, and institutional support. These steps are necessary to ensure that their role continues to positively contribute to the deepening of Indonesia's



democracy in the years to come, particularly as legal and political institutions adapt to a more decentralized and digitized landscape (Panov et al., 2023; Firmandayu & Elfaki, 2023).

D. Conclusion

This study has highlighted the significant role of ulama as influential actors in political communication during the *Pilkada* in Mandailing Natal Regency. Drawing from George Herbert Mead's symbolic interaction theory, the findings demonstrate that ulama constructs political meaning through religious symbols, cultural narratives, and continuous interaction with the community. Through forums such as *majelis taklim*, *pengajian*, and Friday sermons, ulama delivers messages that emphasize justice, integrity, and civic responsibility—values that resonate strongly within the religious and cultural context of the region.

Ulama in Mandailing Natal are not only spiritual leaders but also political communicators who shape voter perceptions and behavior. Their ability to integrate political messages within trusted religious platforms makes them powerful agents of democratic participation. The community views voting not merely as a civic duty, but as a moral act rooted in religious obligation. This symbolic framing has contributed to increased political awareness, voter engagement, and the construction of collective political identity based on shared values.

Theoretically, this research affirms the relevance of symbolic interactionism in understanding grassroots political behavior. Practically, it underscores the potential of ulama to foster democratic ethics when they promote inclusive, value-based communication. At the same time, the study warns of the risk of polarization when ulama acts as partisan figures rather than neutral guides, especially in communities where political preferences are shaped by identity affiliations.

Globally, the findings reflect broader trends in Muslim-majority societies such as Malaysia and Turkey, where ulama similarly influences political narratives and public legitimacy. The case of Mandailing Natal contributes to international discourse by showing how faith-based

political communication can support democracy when rooted in ethics but also needs safeguards to prevent the misuse of religious authority for political gain.

For future research, it is recommended to explore similar phenomena in different cultural or religious contexts, including more diverse geographic areas, and to consider the role of female religious figures in political discourse and a younger electorate that is more digitally connected and socially diverse. Combining qualitative insights with quantitative approaches may also offer a deeper understanding of the scale and impact of ulama-led communication. Such research will enrich both the theoretical landscape and practical strategies for managing the intersection of religion and politics in plural societies. Additionally, comparative research between different regions or religious traditions may reveal alternative patterns of religious authority in political contexts. By continuing to examine the intersection of religion and politics through nuanced, context-specific approaches, scholars can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how faith-based leadership shapes the evolving landscape of democratic participation.

In sum, ulama in Mandailing Natal exemplifies how religious leadership, when guided by ethical principles, can contribute positively to democratic processes. However, this dual role must be navigated with caution to ensure that religion serves as a bridge for political awareness and unity rather than a tool for division.

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Interview

- H. Mahmuddin Pasaribu, a the Chairman of MUI Mandailing Natal Regency, 21 Juni 2023
- M. Yunan Lubis, a Secretary of Muhammadiyah Mandailing Natal Regional Leadership, 21 Juni 2023
- Samsul Bahri Lubis, a Madina Gerakan Pemuda Ansor Chairman, 21 Juni 2023
- Rizaluddin, a the KNPI Administrator of Mandailing Natal Regency, 21 Juni 2023
- Horas Tua Silalahi, a Mandailing Natal Police Chief AKBP, 19 Juni 2023