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The Role of Dayah Ulama in Political Communication during the 2024 Aceh Elections

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ABSTRACT

Dayah ulama in Aceh play a central role in shaping social and political order through their strong moral legitimacy. In the 2024 Aceh regional election, their involvement reflects a shift from moral figures to strategic political actors. This study illustrates how dayah ulama's political communication influences public participation and shapes local political dynamics. Using a qualitative approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and thematic analysis. Findings show that dayah ulama utilize traditional preaching and modern strategies, such as social media, to expand political influence. [Added: Reference to integrative vs. polarizing impacts]. Their involvement goes beyond candidate support, constructing political narratives emphasizing pious leadership, sharia protection, and Islamic values in governance. While their communication reinforces shared cultural-religious identity, it can also sharpen social and political divisions depending on context. This contributes to broader discussions on faith-based political communication, showing parallels with global patterns where religious authority functions both as integrative and polarizing force in multicultural societies.

Keywords: Political communication, dayah ulama, Aceh election, political participation, moral legitimacy

ABSTRAK

Dayah ulama di Aceh memainkan peran sentral dalam membentuk tatanan sosial dan politik melalui legitimasi moral mereka. Dalam Pilkada Aceh 2024, keterlibatan mereka menyoroti pergeseran dari tokoh moral menjadi aktor politik strategis. Penelitian ini menggambarkan bagaimana komunikasi politik dayah ulama mempengaruhi partisipasi publik dan membentuk dinamika politik lokal. Dengan pendekatan kualitatif, data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi, dan analisis tematik. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa dayah ulama menggunakan metode khotbah tradisional dan strategi komunikasi modern seperti media sosial untuk memperluas pengaruh politik. [Added: Penekanan pada dampak integratif vs. eksklusif]. Keterlibatan mereka melampaui dukungan kandidat, membangun narasi politik tentang kepemimpinan saleh, perlindungan syariah, dan integrasi nilai Islam dalam pemerintahan lokal. Komunikasi mereka dapat memperkuat identitas budaya-agama bersama namun juga berpotensi mempertajam perpecahan sosial dan politik tergantung konteks. Kontribusi penelitian menghubungkan kasus Aceh dengan studi komunikasi politik global, menunjukkan fungsi ganda agama sebagai kekuatan pemersatu sekaligus sumber polarisasi.

Kata Kunci: Komunikasi politik, dayah ulama, pilkada Aceh, partisipasi politik, legitimasi moral

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INTRODUCTION

Aceh is a region in Indonesia rich in culture and deeply rooted Islamic traditions, which shape its social and political life. Dayah ulama serve not only as religious leaders but also as guardians of community morals and cultural values (Novriansyah et al., 2024).

Dayah ulama influence community mindset and political attitudes. The term “ulama” refers to learned individuals, or al-‘allamah in Arabic (Rahimi & Syaibatul Hamdi, 2023). Respected figures, dayah ulama often guide political decision-making, especially during elections. In such situations, the people of Aceh tend to listen to the views and advice of the dayah ulama as a guide in making their political choices (Novriansyah et al., 2024). This indicates that dayah ulama possess not only moral authority but also significant political influence.

Their political communication is both grounded in religious principles and adapted to Acehnese culture (Muntasir & Aminullah, 2020). They effectively reach elite and grassroots levels, mobilizing political participation while also generating potential tensions: legitimizing some candidates, marginalizing alternative voices, or creating divisions among competing ulama. The impact of their political communication is evident in their ability to mobilize the masses and foster political awareness in alignment with Islamic values. However, such influence also brings potential tensions: political communication rooted in religion can legitimize certain candidates while delegitimizing others, sharpen divisions among rival groups of ulama, and even marginalize alternative voices, such as women, secular youth, or minority communities. These dimensions reveal that dayah ulama’s communication is not only integrative but also contested, making their role both unifying and divisive.

The 2024 Aceh regional election is a key case to understand dayah ulama’s strategic political role. Their communication influences voter preferences and democratic participation (Katimin et al., 2020). Yet, the “balance” they create between democracy and Islamic values does not always produce harmony; instead, it may generate exclusion, sharpen political rivalry, or reinforce power hierarchies. These ambivalent outcomes underscore the complexity of religious-based political communication in Aceh.

Overall, the political communication of dayah ulama in Aceh reflects an intricate relationship between politics, religion, and local culture. In the context of the 2024 Aceh regional election, this role becomes increasingly relevant as it demonstrates both the integrative and conflictual dimensions of religion-based political influence (Muntasir & Aminullah, 2020). Studying dayah ulama’s political communication not only enriches our understanding of local traditions but also contributes to broader communication scholarship

by showing how moral legitimacy and cultural values are strategically mobilized in political discourse. This perspective expands the scope of political communication studies, offering new insights into how faith-based authority interacts with democratic processes in highly religious societies.

Despite their known influence, research on their political communication strategies remains limited (Rasyad et al., 2022). This study fills the gap by analyzing how *dayah ulama* construct and convey political messages in regional elections.

Moreover, the dynamics and effectiveness of *dayah ulama*'s political communication in the 2024 Aceh regional election remain questions that have yet to be fully answered (Novriansyah et al., 2024). In a political landscape marked by competing interests and intense rivalry, it is important to understand the extent to which their communication strategies influence the public. The process of balancing political messages with the Islamic values deeply upheld in Aceh has also not been clearly revealed. This presents a challenge for research to identify how *dayah ulama* maintain both their moral legitimacy and political relevance (Idria, 2024). By situating this study within broader debates on political communication, this research not only fills an empirical gap in Acehese studies but also provides theoretical contributions to understanding how religion-based authority operates in contested political environments.

Furthermore, the impact of *dayah ulama*'s political communication on public participation and political decision-making remains under-researched (Suganda et al., 2024). While existing studies highlight their influence on shaping voter perceptions and community engagement, the precise mechanisms through which their communication strategies affect political outcomes are still not clearly understood. What remains unexplored is how religious authority, cultural narratives, and communication styles interact in mobilizing or constraining political participation. Examining these dynamics in the context of the Aceh regional election can provide valuable insights into the broader relationship between religion-based authority and democratic practices in highly religious societies.

Previous studies have extensively discussed the role of *ulama* in Aceh's social and political life, particularly as moral guardians and community guides (Rasyidin, 2021). However, studies that specifically examine the political communication strategies of *dayah ulama* in the context of regional elections remain very limited. In political moments such as the 2024 Aceh regional election, political communication becomes a crucial aspect in determining how the messages of *dayah ulama* are received and understood by the public (Yusfriadi, 2021). This gap needs to be addressed in order to gain a deeper understanding of the contribution of *dayah ulama* to the dynamics of local politics in Aceh.

To address this gap, this study aims to examine how *dayah ulama* construct, convey, and influence the public through their political communication during the 2024 Aceh regional election (Zulham & Ristati, 2021). This process involves analyzing their strategies, the media they employ, and the approaches they use to reach different segments of society. By understanding these dynamics, the study seeks to provide a more comprehensive picture of the role of *dayah ulama* in integrating Islamic values into the democratic process (Lira Sopi Ema et al., 2024).

This study not only seeks to reveal the strategic role of *dayah ulama* in regional elections but also aims to offer new insights into the relationship between religion, culture, and politics in Aceh. By focusing on the aspect of political communication, the research is expected to address questions regarding how *dayah ulama* effectively foster public political participation. The findings of this study are anticipated to contribute to the development of local political studies and enrich the broader discourse on the intersection of religion and democracy in Indonesia.

RESEARCH METHOD

A qualitative approach was used to explore *dayah ulama*'s political communication during the 2024 election (Syafieh et al., 2022). Participants were selected via purposive sampling: (1) prominent *dayah ulama*, (2) community leaders, (3) politicians affiliated with *dayah*, and (4) voters. A total of 28 semi-structured interviews were conducted, supplemented by field observations of religious gatherings, campaign events, and social media interactions.

Data were collected between February and May 2024. In total, 28 semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted: 10 with *dayah ulama*, 6 with community leaders, 4 with *dayah*-affiliated politicians, and 8 with ordinary citizens. Interviews ranged from 60 to 90 minutes, were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia or Acehese depending on participant preference, and were recorded (with consent) before being transcribed verbatim. In addition to interviews, field observations were conducted by attending religious gatherings (*pengajian*), campaign events where *ulama* were invited as speakers, and monitoring *ulama*-led discussions on social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp groups. These observations provided contextual insights into how *dayah ulama* communicate across different settings.

Thematic analysis followed Braun & Clarke's (2006) framework. Coding focused on recurring themes in *dayah ulama*'s strategies, narratives, and impacts on political participation. NVivo was used to assist analysis.

DISCUSSION

Findings show *dayah ulama* have become more active in politics since 2017 and, by 2024, some ran directly for Governor (Novriansyah et al., 2024; Sari et al., 2024). Their role expanded from religious figures to strategic actors, shaping agendas and contributing to new political parties (Zulkarnaen et al., 2023). This reflects a transformation of their social function, in which religious authority is converted into organizational and political capital.

A central aspect of this transformation lies in the political communication strategies of *dayah ulama*. They continue to employ traditional *dakwah* methods (lectures, sermons, religious gatherings) while also adapting to contemporary media environments. *Dayah ulama* employ traditional *dakwah* methods and modern tools like social media to mobilize political participation (Rahma et al., 2024). This combination of traditional and modern strategies reflects their flexibility in maintaining relevance in a rapidly changing political landscape.

However, a deeper analysis reveals a dualistic and tension-filled nature of their political communication. On one hand, *dayah ulama* emphasize a “politics of manners” by urging their followers to uphold ethics, avoid humiliation of opponents, and frame politics as a form of *amar ma’ruf nahi munkar* (promoting good and preventing evil). This strategy fosters internal solidarity among their support base and strengthens the moral legitimacy of their messages (Yusfriadi, 2021). On the other hand, their communication also operates as identity politics: while it unites their community, it simultaneously draws sharp boundaries against opponents. By delegitimizing rival candidates, reinforcing their own authority, and framing politics in moral-religious terms, *ulama* inevitably contribute to polarization. Thus, their role cannot be reduced to either harmony or conflict; it is inherently both, depending on perspective and context.

This duality—creating cohesion internally while generating divisions externally—is not a contradiction but the very nature of religion-based political communication. It reflects the logic of identity politics, where solidarity and exclusion are produced simultaneously. Recognizing this dual function helps us move beyond idealized narratives of harmony and acknowledge the contested realities of Aceh’s democratic life.

Another notable finding is the way *dayah ulama* construct political narratives that extend beyond candidate endorsement. They promote visions of pious leadership, the safeguarding of *sharia*, and the integration of Islamic values into governance. These narratives give legitimacy to their political stance and mobilize participation not just through material interests but also moral-cultural appeals (Sunata et al., 2022). What is new here is the integration of moral legitimacy with modern communication tools: social media amplifies

narratives of piety and religious identity, bridging traditional authority with contemporary political mobilization.

A dualistic nature is evident:

1. Internal (integrative): Promotes ethics, solidarity, and political participation.
2. External (exclusive/polarizing): Delegitimizes rivals and sharpens boundaries.

However, the involvement of ulama from dayah institutions in practical politics also presents several challenges. One of the main concerns is how they can maintain their independence amid increasingly complex political pressures. Direct involvement in political parties or open support for specific candidates carries the risk of diminishing public trust in the ulama. Interview data from this study suggest that, despite these risks, many Acehnese citizens still view dayah ulama as credible sources of moral and political guidance, particularly because their authority is rooted in religious legitimacy rather than material interests. As one community leader explained:

"Even if they support a candidate, we still listen to them because they speak based on religion. What we fear is when ulama become too close to politicians, then their advice will no longer be purely for the people." (Interview, March 2024)

Similarly, a young voter emphasized that while ulama influence remains strong, it is conditional on maintaining neutrality:

"We respect ulama because they are our guides, but if they act like politicians, people will start doubting their sincerity. Trust is strong now, but it can decrease if they only defend one side." (Interview, April 2024)

These perspectives illustrate that public trust in ulama remains high, but it is not unconditional. The challenge of balancing their dual roles as religious leaders and political actors remains critical to sustaining long-term legitimacy.

On the other hand, the transformation of the role of dayah ulama also reflects the increasingly competitive nature of local politics in Aceh (Erawadi & Setiadi, 2024). Their presence in practical politics highlights the need for figures who can bridge the gap between public interests and government policies. In this context, dayah ulama are seen as actors capable of articulating the aspirations of the people while also providing moral legitimacy to the political process.

The use of communication strategies that combine both traditional and modern approaches has become a distinctive feature of *dayah ulama* in the 2024 Aceh regional elections. While they continue to rely on religious gatherings and sermons as primary channels for conveying political messages, they have also begun integrating digital technology to broaden their outreach (Erawadi & Setiadi, 2024). According to Tgk. Mujlisal, this combination demonstrates the flexibility of *dayah ulama* in addressing the challenges of political communication in the digital era.

This dynamic offers new insights into the interplay between religion, culture, and politics in Aceh. The involvement of *ulama* from *dayah* institutions in practical politics not only signifies a shift in the social structure but also reflects how the Acehnese society responds to these changes (Rasyad et al., 2022). Their presence in regional elections adds a strong religious dimension to the political process, setting it apart from political dynamics in other regions of Indonesia.

Furthermore, these findings also highlight the potential of *dayah ulama* to serve as significant agents of social change. According to Dr. Musbani, through their political communication, *dayah ulama* have been able to encourage the public to engage in the political process in more meaningful ways. This participation goes beyond simply casting votes; it also involves the community in discussions and decision-making processes that directly impact their lives.

However, this shift in roles also requires a critical analysis of its impact on Acehnese society. The involvement of *dayah ulama* in practical politics can have positive effects in terms of community empowerment, but it may also lead to polarization if not managed properly (Rasyidin, 2021). Therefore, it is essential to understand how *dayah ulama* can maintain a balance between their roles as religious leaders and political actors.

The findings of this study reflect a significant shift in the political dynamics of Aceh, particularly concerning the role of *dayah ulama*. Traditionally known as moral leaders and guardians of religious values, these *ulama* are now leveraging their moral legitimacy to support specific political positions (Rahma et al., 2024). This shift not only illustrates how *dayah ulama* are adapting to social change, but also highlights their efforts to remain relevant in the face of contemporary challenges. With strong legitimacy in the eyes of the public, *dayah ulama* are able to influence local political processes in ways that other political actors cannot.

The direct involvement of *dayah ulama* in practical politics is evidence of the increasingly complex transformation of their role. Their traditional functions as religious educators and

spiritual guides have now expanded to include active participation in political decision-making processes. This development signifies that *dayah ulama* are no longer merely observers of political change, but have become active drivers within it (Rasyad et al., 2022). In this context, *dayah ulama* serve not only as messengers but also as narrative builders who shape political discourse, influence local policies, and help direct the course of governance.

However, their involvement in practical politics does not come without significant challenges. One of the most pressing concerns is maintaining their independence as respected religious figures amid political pressures and competing interests (Tjatur Raharso, 2023). Reliance on practical politics carries the risk of diminishing public trust in *dayah ulama*, especially if they are perceived as being overly aligned with a particular group—an issue highlighted in a confidential interview with a senior *ulama* in Aceh Barat. This situation demands that *dayah ulama* strike a careful balance: continuing to uphold religious values while engaging in politics without compromising their moral integrity.

Moreover, this shift in roles also reflects the evolving social and cultural dynamics in Aceh, which are increasingly influenced by globalization and modernization. The political communication carried out by *dayah ulama* not only integrates religious values but also incorporates modern elements, such as the use of social media to reach a broader audience (Thahir, 2023). This demonstrates their awareness of the importance of communication strategies that are relevant to contemporary developments. As a result, they are not only seen as local figures but also as actors capable of leveraging technology to strengthen their influence.

Nevertheless, the involvement of *dayah ulama* in politics also presents significant opportunities for the people of Aceh. Their respected status enables them to serve as a bridge between the community and the government. In many cases, *dayah ulama* are able to articulate the aspirations of the people—voices that are often unheard through formal political channels. Their presence in practical politics also brings a strong religious dimension to the political process in Aceh, setting it apart from political dynamics in other regions of Indonesia (Rasyad et al., 2022).

However, it is important to recognize that this transformation also requires careful management. *Dayah ulama* must be able to maintain a balance between their roles as religious leaders and political actors in order to preserve public trust (Ernawati Ernawati et al., 2024). This is particularly crucial in Acehnese society, which is deeply rooted in strong cultural and religious ties. If not properly managed, the involvement of *dayah ulama* in

politics could lead to polarization that threatens social harmony in Aceh (Zulkarnaen et al., 2023).

The transformation of the role of *dayah ulama* also offers valuable insights into the relationship between religion and politics in a religiously devout society. This study reveals that religion is not merely a cultural factor, but also a vital element in shaping political policies and strategies (Bahri et al., 2024). In this context, *dayah ulama* serve as symbols of legitimacy, integrating religious values with the demands of modern politics. This role positions them strategically to drive sustainable social change.

Overall, the involvement of *dayah ulama* in practical politics reflects the intricate interplay between religion, culture, and politics in Aceh. This dynamic not only offers new insights into social change but also highlights the importance of effective political communication in fostering public participation (Muntasir & Aminullah, 2020). With the moral legitimacy they possess, *dayah ulama* have the potential to become agents of change who can guide Acehnese society toward a more inclusive and meaningful political process.

Challenges include maintaining neutrality amid political pressures. Citizens respect *dayah ulama* because their guidance is rooted in religion rather than political interests.

To visualize communication:



CONCLUSION

This study illustrates that *dayah ulama* in Aceh use political communication to expand influence in practical politics. Strategies combine traditional lectures and modern channels like social media. This reflects a shift from moral leadership to active political actors shaping local narratives.

These findings resonate with international studies where religious authority acts as both integrative and polarizing forces in multicultural societies (Campbell & Tsuria, 2019; Fox & Sandler, 2020; Wuthnow, 2019).

The dual tension of moral legitimacy and political engagement highlights the complexity of religion-based communication. *Dayah ulama* can mobilize communities while potentially creating social boundaries.

The contribution of this study lies in offering fresh insights into the interplay between religion, culture, and politics in Aceh, particularly in the context of electoral competition. It demonstrates how religious leaders adapt to modern political communication and how their strategies can both empower communities and complicate democratic dynamics.

Future research could expand to comparative studies in other regions or incorporate quantitative surveys to complement qualitative findings.

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