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Between public ethics and political legitimacy: Reading Nurcholish Madjid's political desacralization in the 2024 Cilegon election

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Abstract

The relationship between religion and politics in electoral contests raises questions about the boundary between religious expression and political legitimacy. This study examines representations of religious identity in the 2024 Cilegon City Regional Election through Nurcholish Madjid's perspective on political desacralization. It uses a qualitative approach involving library research and document analysis. The analysis identifies patterns of religious representation and interprets them through Madjid's concepts of *tawḥīd*, secularization, desacralization, and rationalization. Findings reveal four patterns of religious legitimacy: personal morality, closeness to religious authorities, social concern, and the articulation of religious values in social agendas. Robinsar–Fajar Hadi Prabowo were represented through personal piety and social concern; Helldy Agustian–Alawi Mahmud through ethical piety and closeness to religious figures; and Isro Mi'raj–Nurrotul Uyun through empathetic social concern. The study argues that religion can provide public ethics but should not be used to absolutize political power. Political legitimacy must remain subject to evaluation based on rationality, justice, leadership capacity, and public accountability.

Keywords: Political desacralization; Religious identity; Religious legitimacy; Nurcholish Madjid; 2024 Cilegon regional election.

Abstrak

Hubungan agama dan politik dalam kontestasi elektoral menghadirkan persoalan mengenai batas antara ekspresi keagamaan dan penggunaannya untuk membangun legitimasi kekuasaan. Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis representasi identitas keagamaan dalam Pilkada Kota Cilegon Tahun 2024 melalui perspektif desakralisasi politik Nurcholish Madjid. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan metode studi kepustakaan dan analisis dokumen. Data dianalisis dengan mengidentifikasi pola representasi keagamaan dan menafsirkannya melalui gagasan tauhid, sekularisasi, desakralisasi, dan rasionalisasi Madjid. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan empat pola konstruksi legitimasi keagamaan, yaitu moralitas personal, kedekatan dengan otoritas keagamaan, kepedulian sosial, serta artikulasi nilai agama dalam agenda sosial. Robinsar–Fajar Hadi Prabowo direpresentasikan melalui kesalehan personal dan kepedulian sosial; Helldy Agustian–Alawi Mahmud melalui kesalehan etis dan kedekatan dengan tokoh agama; sedangkan Isro Mi'raj–Nurrotul Uyun melalui kepedulian sosial yang empatik. Penelitian ini menegaskan bahwa agama dapat menjadi sumber etika publik, tetapi tidak dapat digunakan untuk mengabsolutkan kekuasaan. Legitimasi politik tetap perlu dinilai berdasarkan rasionalitas, keadilan, kapasitas kepemimpinan, dan pertanggungjawaban publik.

Kata Kunci: Desakralisasi politik; Identitas keagamaan; Legitimasi keagamaan; Nurcholish Madjid; Pilkada Cilegon 2024.

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Introduction

Local political contests in Indonesia demonstrate that religious identity is not merely part of voters' social background but can also serve as a basis for constructing candidates' public images and garnering political support. In the 2010 Medan regional election, for example, the first round featured ten candidate pairs forming cross-ethnic coalitions. However, in the second round, the competition shifted as campaign messages urged Muslim voters to support a Muslim candidate on religious grounds; that candidate subsequently won by a substantial margin (Aspinall et al., 2011). A different pattern emerged in the 2012 Jakarta gubernatorial election: Fauzi Bowo cultivated a religious image through symbols and persuasion, while Joko Widodo also participated in several religious campaign activities but adopted a more subtle approach (Miichi, 2014). Both cases demonstrate that religious identity can be strategically mobilized depending on the context of electoral competition. This shift highlights that religious symbols operate within particular competitive settings rather than in a politically neutral space.

The use of religious identity in elections does not always take the form of direct appeals for support; it can also shape social boundaries and political orientations between groups. In the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election, Ubaid and Subandi (2017) identified polarization based on religious identity, particularly in the second round, interpreting it as evidence of growing ideological polarization among voters. At the national level, Widian et al. (2023) examined the use of religion in political events in 2014, 2017, and 2019. They showed that populist actors adapted their use of Islamic narratives to the political environment; during the 2019 election, strategic conditions encouraged the use of Islamic narratives as an instrument of mass mobilization. These findings indicate that religion can function as a political language that fosters a sense of affinity while distinguishing groups of supporters. Religious narratives can therefore serve as framing devices that shape both proximity and distance between groups.

At the local level, the relationship between religion and politics is also shaped by the authority of religious figures, religious organizations, and candidates' policy platforms. In the 2017 Brebes regional election, Makhasin (2017) demonstrated the involvement of Nahdlatul Ulama in electoral competition through the intersection of patronage politics and piety. However, he emphasized that these two elements do not automatically sustain oligarchy or trigger intolerance and violence. In Pamekasan, Asmawati et al. (2021), drawing on qualitative interviews, found that *kiai* mobilized social capital and religiosity to act as intermediaries in voter mobilization, although the practice of providing material incentives to voters was considered unethical. Meanwhile, Harjanto (2019) showed that the village head election in Temon Kulon, Yogyakarta, brought religious identity politics into interaction with programmatic politics. This suggests that candidates' legitimacy is formed through negotiations

among identity, authority, and public agendas. These findings position legitimacy as a relational process rather than an automatic attribute of a candidate.

Previous studies have explained how religion features in electoral contests, but have not fully examined the boundary between religious legitimacy and the justification of political power. Through a comparison of the 2024 regional elections in Aceh, Jakarta, and East Java, Fauzi et al. (2026) found that Islamic representation took different forms across contexts: the legitimacy of Islamic law in Aceh, inclusive moral narratives in Jakarta, and networks of *pesantren* and Islamic organizations in East Java. Based on interviews with seven Muslim village heads in Yogyakarta, Irawan et al. (2026) demonstrated how religious norms are negotiated with electoral pragmatism. More specifically, through a virtual ethnography of the official Instagram and TikTok accounts of the three candidate pairs in Cilegon, Koswara et al. (2026) mapped religious representations in election campaigns. However, how these representations can be interpreted through Nurcholish Madjid's political desacralization remains to be examined. Accordingly, this study investigates the construction of religious legitimacy in the Cilegon regional election.

This study aims to examine how representations of religious identity in the 2024 Cilegon regional election contributed to the construction of political legitimacy and how this phenomenon can be interpreted through Nurcholish Madjid's thought on political desacralization. This inquiry is important because religion occupies a significant social position in society, allowing representations of piety, proximity to religious figures, and social concern to acquire political meaning. However, the acceptance of religious symbols or authority should not render candidates and political power immune to critical scrutiny. Drawing on the principles of *tawḥīd* and desacralization, this study positions religion as a source of public ethics rather than an instrument for absolutizing human power. Its contribution lies in offering a critical examination of religious legitimacy through the principles of rationality, public benefit, justice, and political accountability. This perspective also helps distinguish respect for religion from its instrumental use for electoral interests.

Method

This study employs a qualitative approach using library research and document analysis. Library research involves examining various written sources to develop a conceptual understanding and interpret the phenomenon under investigation (George, 2008; Snyder, 2019). Document analysis is used to systematically examine the content, context, and interrelationships among documents (Bowen, 2009). The sources include the works of Nurcholish Madjid, particularly *Keharusan Pembaruan Pemikiran Islam dan Masalah Integrasi Umat* (1970), "Sekali Lagi tentang Sekularisasi" (1972), *Islam, Kemodernan, dan Keindonesiaan* (1987), "Sekularisasi Ditinjau Kembali" (1987), and *Cita-Cita Politik Islam Era Reformasi* (1999), as well as the study by Koswara et al. (2026) on

the representation of religious identity in the 2024 Cilegon regional election. In addition, this study draws on relevant literature addressing Madjid's thought, political legitimacy, religious identity, the relationship between religion and democracy, and local electoral contests. The literature was selected based on its direct relevance to these themes, particularly studies examining the role of religious identity in electoral competition, the involvement of religious authorities in local politics, the use of religious narratives in political mobilization, and the relationship between religious norms and democratic practices. The selection also considered the credibility of the publishing journal or institution and the availability of verifiable bibliographic information.

Data analysis follows the qualitative analysis model proposed by Miles et al. (2014), which comprises three stages: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. During data condensation, information from various sources is selected and categorized according to the research focus, particularly the concepts of *tawḥīd*, secularization, desacralization, and forms of religious representation in the Cilegon regional election. The data are then presented in narrative form and tables to identify patterns of religious representation, mechanisms of image construction, and the formation of political legitimacy. At the conclusion drawing and verification stage, these patterns are interpreted through Madjid's thought to identify the boundary between religion as a source of public ethics and its use to justify political interests. The interpretation process involves comparing empirical findings from previous studies with theoretical concepts and supporting literature. Since this study relies on secondary data and does not independently collect field data, its conclusions are limited to the construction of religious representation and legitimacy, rather than voter reception, the influence of religious identity on electoral choices, or evidence of the actual practice of political sacralization by candidate pairs.

Results and Discussion

Representations of religious identity in the 2024 Cilegon regional election

The 2024 Cilegon City regional election demonstrated that religious identity was one of the elements present in candidates' political communication. Koswara et al. (2026) examined these representations through a virtual ethnographic study of the official Instagram and TikTok accounts of the three candidate pairs. The study observed posts, videos, campaign narratives, religious symbols, social programs, and user interactions throughout the campaign period and on election day. The findings showed that religious identity was represented not only through religious symbols or attributes but also through narratives of personal piety, social concern, relationships with religious figures, and programs related to community life. These findings indicate that religion served as one of the sources for constructing political images in the Cilegon regional

election. These representations warrant examination because they reveal how religious values and identities are communicated within the sphere of local politics.

The Robinsar–Fajar Hadi Prabowo ticket represented religious identity through personal piety oriented toward social concern. Koswara et al. (2026) identified that this ticket's religious image was primarily associated with actions and concern for community issues. This representation resonates with media reports on the Robinsar–Fajar campaign strategy, which involved visits to various locations, discussion forums for young people and university students, and weekly greening programs. Hayati (2024a) reported that the head of the ticket's campaign team mentioned approximately 500 campaign visits. During the second debate of the Cilegon regional election, the ticket also presented programs to develop 5,000 MSMEs and create employment opportunities (Metro TV, 2024). These activities indicate an emphasis on maintaining close ties with the community and addressing social issues. However, the classification of this ticket's religious identity remains based on the findings of Koswara et al. (2026), rather than on its campaign programs alone.

The Helldy Agustian–Alawi Mahmud ticket represented religious identity through ethical piety and closeness to religious figures. Koswara et al. (2026) identified these two aspects as the main characteristics of the ticket's religious representation in its social media political communication. Religious expression was also evident in the closing campaign held on 23 November 2024, which featured collective prayers and *ṣalawāt* with the community at Tegal Tong Field, Citangkil (Redaksi Babebanten, 2024). During the second debate of the Cilegon regional election, the ticket also presented educational programs, including free education for underprivileged students, scholarships, and skills certification (Metro TV, 2024). These activities indicate that the Helldy–Alawi ticket's political communication combined religious expression with the presentation of social and educational programs. The differences in the forms of representation among the three candidate pairs are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Representations of religious identity and political communication among candidate pairs in the 2024 Cilegon regional election

Candidate pair	Representation of religious identity	Expression in communication and campaign activities	Political image orientation
Robinsar–Fajar Hadi Prabowo	Personal piety oriented toward social concern	Visits to communities, discussion forums for young people and university students, and greening programs	Closeness to the community and concern for social issues
Helldy Agustian–Alawi Mahmud	Ethical piety and closeness to religious figures	Collective prayers and *ṣalawāt* with the community, along with the presentation of educational programs	Religious morality and commitment to education

Isro Mi'raj–Nurrotul Uyun	Empathetic social concern	Picking up litter after a mass campaign event and presenting education and healthcare programs	Social role modelling and public service

Source: Compiled from Koswara et al. (2026), Hayati (2024a, 2024b), Redaksi Babebanten (2024), and Metro TV (2024).

As shown in Table 1, the three candidate pairs displayed different patterns of religious identity representation. Robinsar–Fajar emphasized personal piety through an orientation toward social concern, Helldy–Alawi presented ethical piety associated with religious expression and closeness to religious figures, while Isro–Uyun demonstrated empathetic social concern. In the case of Isro–Uyun, one reported expression was Isro Mi'raj's action of picking up litter after a mass campaign event at Cigiceh Field, Jombang District (Hayati, 2024b). During the second debate, the ticket also presented programs offering free education at private schools and madrasas, as well as a 24-hour Call Sehat service (Metro TV, 2024). These activities indicate an emphasis on social role modelling and public service. Nevertheless, social actions and service programs do not in themselves demonstrate religious motivations; rather, they are treated as contextual elements of political communication that complement the classification of religious identity in the study by Koswara et al. (2026).

These differences in representation indicate that religious identity in local political contests does not always appear in the form of explicit religious symbols and slogans. Identity is also constructed through narratives, social actions, relationships among actors, and the presentation of programs that acquire meaning within the local social context. Castells (2010) explains identity as a social construction formed through processes of meaning-making and social relations. In the context of political communication, social media provides a space for candidates to construct and disseminate these representations of identity. Through their study of the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election, Arsyad and Asdar (2019) demonstrated how religious identity was constructed as a political discourse on social media. Meanwhile, Harjanto (2019) showed that identity politics and programmatic politics can coexist in local political contests. Thus, representations of religious identity in the Cilegon regional election should be understood as part of political communication strategies that interact with the social context and candidates' programmatic agendas.

These findings are insufficient to conclude that any particular representation of religious identity was more effective in influencing voters' choices. The study by Koswara et al. (2026) focused on representations of identity in political communication on social media, while the media reports used in this discussion provide context for candidates' campaign activities and programs. Neither type of source directly measures voter reception or establishes a causal relationship between religious representation and voting outcomes. Therefore, this discussion does not portray any

candidate pair as the most religious, nor does it conclude that the use of religious identity necessarily constitutes a form of political manipulation. Instead, the analysis focuses on how religious identity is represented and incorporated into political communication. This mapping provides a basis for examining political desacralization in Nurcholish Madjid's thought, particularly the relationship between religion, rationality, and the legitimacy of political power.

Political desacralization in Nurcholish Madjid's thought

Nurcholish Madjid's thought on desacralization is rooted in the principle of *tawḥīd*, namely the recognition that only God possesses absolute authority and supreme sanctity. This principle entails that everything other than God, including human thought, traditions, institutions, and authority, cannot be placed in an absolute position. In the context of Islamic renewal, Madjid (1970) criticized the tendency among Muslims to conflate transcendental values with matters that are essentially temporal. As a result, human intellectual products and traditions may be treated as though they possess the same sanctity as religious teachings. Khaeroni (2020) identifies *tawḥīd* and secularization as essential components of Madjid's reformist ideas. Meanwhile, Raharja (2022) explains that secularization derives from the implications of *tawḥīd*, namely the liberation of profane matters from inappropriate sacralization. Thus, *tawḥīd* provides the theological foundation for challenging the absolutization of human authority.

This theological foundation is connected to the idea of modernization as rationalization rather than Westernization. Madjid (1987a) viewed modernization as a process of employing rationality to address changes in human life, rather than imitating Western culture or abandoning religion. This idea is related to the agenda of Islamic intellectual renewal presented in his 1970 paper, *Keharusan Pembaruan Pemikiran Islam dan Masalah Integrasi Umat*. In this paper, Madjid (1970) emphasized the importance of freedom of thought, *the idea of progress*, and an open-minded attitude as prerequisites for renewal. Sahlan and Anugrah (2026) interpret this agenda as a liberalization of thought grounded in rational reasoning. This means that religious views should not be upheld merely because they have been inherited or widely accepted; rather, they must be explainable and intellectually defensible. Rationality thus serves as a foundation for overcoming intellectual stagnation and creating room for the evaluation of religious understanding.

Within this framework of renewal, secularization is an important concept that must be distinguished from secularism. Madjid (1972) explained that secularization was not intended to implement secularism or remove religion from social life. Rather, secularization is better understood as a process of liberating worldly affairs from the inappropriate attribution of sacred status. Madjid (1987b) revisited this idea in his essay *Sekularisasi Ditinjau Kembali*, in response to debates and misunderstandings

surrounding the use of the term secularization. Duschka (2024) shows that in this essay, Madjid maintained the fundamental direction of his thought while considering the use of more appropriate and neutral terminology. Thus, desacralization involves distinguishing between the transcendental and the temporal domains. Worldly affairs need not be separated from religion, but neither should they be treated as possessing absolute sanctity.

The distinction between religion and human intellectual products has direct implications for political life. Madjid (1970) introduced the expression "Islam, Yes; Islamic Party, No" as a critique of the tendency to equate Islam with a particular political party. This expression does not reject the involvement of Muslims in politics; rather, it emphasizes that a political party is a human-made organization and cannot claim to represent Islam in absolute terms. Parties have interests and limitations and are susceptible to error; therefore, they must remain open to scrutiny. In *Cita-Cita Politik Islam Era Reformasi*, Madjid (1999) also discussed the importance of Islamic values in building a democratic political life. Jun (2022) explains that Madjid's thought on Islamic political parties emphasizes the distinction between Islamic teachings and political organizations that adopt an Islamic identity. Accordingly, religious identity does not automatically grant immunity from criticism to political parties, leaders, or political decisions.

The implications of Madjid's thought extend beyond criticism of political parties to issues of pluralism, democracy, and civil society. Religion should provide ethical guidance for communal life, including justice, deliberation, solidarity, and respect for differences. Within this framework, political legitimacy cannot be established solely through symbolic proximity to religion; it must also be demonstrated through actions and accountability to society. Madjid (1999) positioned Islamic values as a foundation for building a democratic and civilized political order. Kull (2005) shows that Madjid's thought on modern Indonesian Islam encompasses issues of inclusivism, the relationship between religion and politics, and democracy. Amir and Sembiring (2025) likewise identify pluralism and democracy as important elements of Madjid's political thought. Therefore, desacralization can be understood as a rejection of the absolutization of power while simultaneously creating space for criticism and difference.

Based on this body of thought, political desacralization from Madjid's perspective can be understood as an effort to return politics to the domain of human action, which is inherently limited, while maintaining religion as a source of ethical values. Leaders, political parties, ideologies, and policies cannot be considered sacred merely because they employ religious symbols or claim religious legitimacy. All of them must remain open to rational evaluation, criticism, and public accountability. Madjid's thought (1970, 1987, 1999) provides a foundation for distinguishing transcendental religious

values from political interests, which are products of human action. In this study, this distinction is used to differentiate religion as a source of public ethics from the use of religion to absolutize political interests. This distinction is an analytical construct developed in this study based on Madjid's thought, rather than a typology formulated explicitly by Madjid himself.

Political desacralization and the construction of religious legitimacy in the Cilegon regional election

In local political contests, religious identity can be expressed through various forms of representation, ranging from candidates' personal characteristics to their relationships with religious figures and concern for social issues. In the 2024 Cilegon regional election, these variations demonstrated that religious values were not only presented as markers of identity but were also associated with the candidates' moral images and social orientations. Based on the mapping by Koswara et al. (2026), four patterns can be identified to understand the construction of religious legitimacy: personal moral representation, relationships with religious authorities, social concern, and the articulation of religious values in social agendas. These four patterns are summarized in Table 2. This mapping provides a basis for examining how religious identity acquires political meaning and how that meaning can be interpreted through the perspective of political desacralization in Nurcholish Madjid's thought.

Table 2. Construction of religious legitimacy in the 2024 Cilegon regional election

Construction pattern	Empirical basis	Mechanism of legitimacy construction	Madjid's perspective on desacralization
Personal moral representation	Personal piety of Robinsar–Fajar and ethical piety of Helldy–Alawi	Religious identity is presented through candidates' personal character and behavior to construct a moral image.	The principle of *tawḥīd* positions human personal qualities as relative. Piety is a moral dimension, whereas political suitability also concerns leadership capacity and accountability.
Relationships with religious authorities	Helldy–Alawi's closeness to religious figures	Socio-religious relationships serve as one source of image construction and candidates' perceived proximity to religious communities.	Desacralization distinguishes religious authority from political authority. The two may be connected in public life, but they do not occupy identical positions.
Representation of social concern	Social concern of Robinsar–Fajar and social empathy of Isro–Uyun	Concern for social issues is associated with community needs, giving religious images a social orientation.	Rationalization directs attention to how concern is translated into actions and policies that can be assessed

			in terms of their benefits and impacts.
Articulation of religious values in social agendas	Findings concerning religious education, *pesantren*, madrasas, and social services	Religious values are connected to social and institutional agendas relevant to community needs.	Rationalization positions these agendas as public policies that should be assessed in terms of needs, distributive justice, and benefits to society.

Source: Compiled by the author based on Koswara et al. (2026) and Madjid's thought (1970, 1987).

The first pattern shows that personal morality is one source of political image construction. Koswara et al. (2026) identified an orientation toward personal piety associated with social concern in the Robinsar–Fajar ticket, as well as ethical piety in the Helldy–Alawi ticket. Both indicate that candidates' morality is represented through characteristics perceived to be consistent with religious values. However, moral image and leadership capacity are two distinct matters. Wibisono (2018) emphasizes that political choices should take candidates' qualifications into account, rather than relying solely on popularity or religious identity. This view is consistent with Madjid's principle of *tawḥīd* (1970, 1987a): human beings remain limited creatures, and their personal qualities therefore cannot be treated as absolute. Accordingly, piety may serve as a moral consideration, but it is insufficient as the sole basis for political legitimacy.

The second pattern concerns candidates' relationships with religious authorities. Koswara et al. (2026) noted Helldy–Alawi's closeness to religious figures as part of their representation of ethical piety. Such relationships may establish symbolic proximity to religious communities, but their political significance cannot automatically be interpreted as electoral support. This can be examined in light of Ahnaf and Lussier's (2019) findings on the Yogyakarta regional election. They showed that religious leaders do not always use their moral authority to intensify political tensions; in certain contexts, a culture of harmony instead encourages restraint. Lussier and Ahnaf (2024) also found that political messages delivered in places of worship before elections can take various forms and do not necessarily constitute partisan support. This comparison indicates that religious authority is not an automatic source of political legitimacy. Its influence depends on the context, the attitudes of the actors involved, and the ways in which that authority is invoked in electoral contests.

The third pattern concerns social concern as a link between religious identity and community issues. In the findings of Koswara et al. (2026), this orientation was evident in the Robinsar–Fajar and Isro–Uyun tickets, although it was represented with different emphases. Social concern adds a substantive dimension to religious images because moral values extend beyond personal character and are directed toward the

circumstances of community life. Nevertheless, representations of concern do not demonstrate the implementation or impact of policies. Ginting et al. (2026) identify a similar issue in the North Padang Lawas regional election: religion-based political communication can construct moral legitimacy but may also narrow the space for deliberation when socio-religious identity becomes more dominant than programmatic evaluation. Therefore, social concern should be understood not merely as a candidate's image but as an orientation that must subsequently be assessed through public actions and policies.

The fourth pattern emerges in the articulation of religious values through social and institutional agendas. Koswara et al. (2026) noted that religious education, *pesantren*, madrasas, and social services appeared in the political communication of the candidate pairs across the electoral contest. This finding indicates that religion was also connected to institutional issues and community needs, rather than being confined to candidates' personal identities. The central question, therefore, is not whether religious agendas may enter politics, but how such agendas are formulated and justified as public policies. Syarif et al. (2024) show that religious aspirations in Indonesian democracy can interact with popular sovereignty through dialogue and negotiation within the framework of Pancasila. This perspective is consistent with Madjid's (1987b) concept of rationalization: agendas informed by religious values must still be assessed in terms of community needs, justice, and public benefits, rather than solely on the basis of their religious legitimacy.

These four patterns demonstrate that religious legitimacy in the Cilegon regional election was constructed through the relationship between moral image, religious authority, social concern, and institutional agendas. The patterns are not entirely separate, but neither can they be collapsed into a single uniform strategy. Representations of piety, for example, can construct a moral image, while closeness to religious figures establishes a symbolic relationship with religious authority. Meanwhile, social concern and institutional agendas connect religious values with public issues. The findings of Ginting et al. (2026) help explain how relationships among religious narratives, actors, and social identities can shape legitimacy. However, Ahnaf and Lussier (2019) remind us that such relationships do not always result in political mobilization. Accordingly, the construction of religious legitimacy needs to be understood contextually rather than as a process that invariably produces the same electoral consequences.

Theoretically, these findings demonstrate that Madjid's concept of desacralization does not call for the removal of religion from political life. Rather, it helps distinguish religion as a source of moral orientation from political power as a limited human affair that remains open to evaluation (Madjid, 1970, 1987a). Through this distinction, candidates' religious expressions and religious aspirations within public agendas can

remain part of democracy. However, neither automatically grants immunity from criticism or guarantees leadership suitability. The discussion by Syarif et al. (2024) on dialogue between religious aspirations and Pancasila democracy reinforces the importance of negotiation in the public sphere. In the context of Cilegon, the available data demonstrate the construction of religious representations and images, not evidence of voter reception or the practice of sacralizing political power. Therefore, political legitimacy must remain open to reasoning, evaluation, and public accountability.

Conclusion

This study shows that religious legitimacy in the 2024 Cilegon regional election was constructed through four patterns of representation: personal morality, closeness to religious authorities, social concern, and the articulation of religious values in social agendas. These four patterns demonstrate that religious identity functions not only as a marker of belief but also as a source for constructing candidates' moral images and their perceived proximity to the community. This occurs because religious values carry social meanings that can be connected to public expectations regarding leadership character and orientation. Through the perspective of political desacralization in Nurcholish Madjid's thought, this construction must be understood within appropriate limits: religion can serve as a source of public ethics, but it cannot be used to absolutize power or exempt leaders from criticism. Accordingly, political legitimacy must still be assessed in terms of leadership capacity, policy rationality, justice, and public accountability.

This study contributes to the literature by connecting research on the representation of religious identity in local electoral contests with Nurcholish Madjid's thought on desacralization. This framework demonstrates that the issue in the relationship between religion and politics does not lie in the presence of religion itself, but rather in how religious values and authority are used to construct legitimacy and how they relate to the accountability of political power. Nevertheless, this study has limitations because it relies on library research and secondary data, particularly findings from previous studies on religious representation on social media. It does not directly examine voter reception, campaign practices on the ground, or policy implementation after the election. Therefore, future research is encouraged to employ interviews with voters, candidates, and religious figures, alongside analyses of campaign communication and public policies, to understand how religious legitimacy is constructed, received, and held accountable in the practice of local democracy.

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