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Religious Symbolism and Political Legitimacy: A Critical Analysis of Baitul Muslimin Indonesia (BAMUSI)

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how religious symbolism is negotiated within the political communication and da'wah strategies of Baitul Muslimin Indonesia (BAMUSI), an Islamic wing organization affiliated with the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle. The research aims to analyze how religious symbolism is used to construct political legitimacy, reduce anti-Islam stigma toward the party among Muslim voters, and generate polarized interpretations between internal and external actors. Using a qualitative approach within a constructivist paradigm, this study applies a case study design based on in-depth interviews, documentation, and interpretative analysis. The findings reveal that BAMUSI negotiates Islamic symbolism through an integrative discourse that positions Islam, nationalism, and Pancasila as compatible identities within Indonesian democracy. Religious symbols are represented not only through rituals and visual attributes, but also through social-religious programs, digital da'wah, and the involvement of Islamic figures to strengthen emotional and symbolic ties with Muslim communities. However, the study also finds that external actors frequently interpret these symbolic practices as political image-building and electoral camouflage rather than substantive religious commitment. This research concludes that religious symbolism in contemporary Indonesian politics functions as a multidimensional arena of meaning negotiation, political legitimacy, audience accommodation, and identity contestation. The study contributes to the development of political communication and Islamic politics scholarship by demonstrating how religious symbolism operates beyond ideological representation and becomes a strategic mechanism for political branding and legitimacy construction in democratic society.

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INTRODUCTION

Religious symbolism in political communication is one of the important themes in the study of contemporary religious and political relations. In a religious society, religion is not only understood as a private belief system, but also serves as a source of social and political legitimacy that is able to influence the formation of collective identity, ideological orientation, and public acceptance of certain political actors. Hashemi (2014) explains that in modern Muslim society, religion has a central position in the public sphere because it is able to provide a moral basis and legitimacy for political power. In this context, religious symbols, rituals, and narratives are often used as instruments of political communication to build emotional closeness to society while strengthening the ideological legitimacy of political actors. This phenomenon can be seen in the practice of political communication of Baitul Muslimin Indonesia (BAMUSI) as an Islamic wing organization affiliated with the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI Perjuangan)(Thaha, 2018). Through various da'wah activities and socio-religious approaches, BAMUSI seeks to build a construction that Islam and nationalism are not two identities that contradict each other, but can run harmoniously within the framework of Indonesian nationality.

In its political communication practice, BAMUSI develops an inclusive Islamic narrative through the concept of Islam *raḥmatan li al-ʿālamīn* and the affirmation that Islamic values are in harmony with the ideology of Pancasila (Muslimin, 2012). This approach shows that religious symbolism is not only used as a purely religious identity, but also as a political framing instrument to build party legitimacy in Muslim society. Religious symbols and activities in this context serve as a medium of communication that is able to create cultural and emotional closeness with Muslim voters. Kostiuchkov et al. (2024) explains that in contemporary politics, religious symbolism is often used by political actors to reinforce moral legitimacy and create collective identification with religious communities. Their research on populist parties in Poland and Hungary shows that religious symbols and rhetoric can be an effective tool for establishing an image of ideological closeness between political parties and religious communities.

A similar phenomenon is also seen in the practice of BAMUSI's political communication through various activities such as recitation, the Prophet's Birthday, social compensation, Eid al-Adha, and national da'wah forums. From the internal perspective of the organization, the activity is understood as a form of social da'wah that aims to strengthen national values and expand the space for inclusive Islamic dialogue. However, from an external point of view, these activities are often perceived as a political image strategy to strengthen the image that PDI Perjuangan is close to Islamic groups. These differences in interpretation show that religious symbols in political communication do not have a fixed meaning, but rather are constantly produced and negotiated by various social and political actors. Religious symbolism in this context becomes an arena for the contestation of meaning between the interests of substantive da'wah and the interests of political legitimacy.

The study of religious symbolism in politics also shows that religious symbols have moral and philosophical dimensions that go beyond mere visual attributes or formal rituals. Source (2021) explains that modern political legitimacy is still heavily influenced by symbolic constructions derived from religious traditions, especially through the use of moral language, public ethics, and religious narratives in political space. In this perspective, religious symbols are not just a marker of identity, but a medium to build perceptions of the morality, integrity, and social legitimacy of a political power. In the context of BAMUSI, the use of religious symbolism is not only seen at the ritual level, but also in the discursive construction of the relationship between Islam and nationalism. BAMUSI actively builds a narrative that Pancasila is an inclusive and moderate representation of Islamic values. Religious symbolism in BAMUSI's communication practice is not only present in the form of visual symbols and ritual activities, but also at the level of meaning production and ideological framing.

Herrero (2016) affirms that religion has an important role in bridging the relationship between morality, power, and socio-political life. In the context of modern politics, religious symbols and rituals cannot be understood only as ceremonial activities, but also as mechanisms for the formation of social legitimacy and collective solidarity. This perspective is relevant to BAMASI's political communication strategy which utilizes a socio-religious approach to build closeness with the Muslim community. Through recitation forums, approaches from religious leaders, social activities, and community-based programs, BAMUSI seeks to build emotional relationships with various segments of Muslim voters.

The communication strategy also shows that there is a political segmentation directed at the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) group, Muhammadiyah, the urban Muslim middle class, and the younger generation of Muslims. The religious symbolism used by BAMUSI not only serves as a symbolic identity, but also as an instrument of social integration and electoral communication strategy.

On the other hand, a number of studies show that the use of religious symbols in politics also creates tensions between symbolism and the substance of religious values. Frunză (2012) explains that religious symbolism in modern politics is often in an ambiguous position between authentic morality and the instrumentality of power. Religious symbols can be understood as a sincere representation of ethical values, but at the same time they can also be perceived as a tool of pseudo-legitimacy used for practical political gain. This perspective is very relevant to read the dynamics that arise in BAMUSI's political communication practice. Internal actors of the organization emphasized that religious symbols are only a medium of da'wah to build Islamic harmony and nationalism. On the other hand, some external actors view the use of religious symbols and activities as a form of political camouflage and party image strategy. These differences in interpretation show that religious symbolism in political communication has always been multidimensional and open to various social interpretations.

In the context of modern politics, religious symbolism also has an important function in building moral legitimacy in the public sphere. Troy (2020) explains that even secular international institutions such as the United Nations still use religious language and symbols to reinforce global moral legitimacy. The use of terms such as "hope", "salvation", and various other moral symbols shows that religious symbolism still has emotional and legitimative power in building public acceptance. This phenomenon can be used to understand BAMUSI's political communication strategy which seeks to build moral legitimacy for PDI Perjuangan in the midst of stigma as a party that is considered less close to Islamic groups. BAMUSI carries out various counter-issue strategies through national da'wah, approaches to religious leaders, and socio-religious activities to reduce the "anti-Islamic" stigma that is often attached to the party. Thus, religious symbolism in BAMUSI is not only an expression of religious identity, but also an instrument of political communication to reshape the party's image in the Muslim community (Maududi et al., 2024).

Subramanian's Research (2025) It also shows that religious rituals and symbols have a strategic role in building social legitimacy and political authority. Religious rituals are able to create emotional closeness and strengthen perceptions of the relationship between political power and moral legitimacy. In the practice of BAMUSI, various activities such as recitation, commemoration of the Prophet's Birthday, Eid al-Adha, and social compensation are not only understood as da'wah activities, but also as a medium for forming social relations and strengthening political legitimacy. These activities create a space for interaction between political organizations and Muslim society so that religious symbolism functions as a bridge between religious, social, and political dimensions.

The study of religious symbolism in political communication can also be understood through Pierre Bourdieu's theory of symbolic power. In Bourdieu's perspective (2015), symbols have the power to shape social reality through the mechanisms of symbolic power and symbolic violence. Symbolic power works subtly through language, culture, and social practices so that society accepts certain constructions as something natural and legitimate. Hanks (2005) affirms that language and symbols are the main medium in the production of social legitimacy because they both determine how authority is understood and accepted in a social field. Meanwhile, Wacquant (2013) Explains that symbolic power functions to form social solidarity and collective identity through the production of common meaning.

In the context of BAMUSI, the use of religious symbolism can be understood as a strategy for the production of meaning to build a religious image while strengthening political acceptance of PDI Perjuangan in the Muslim community. Dottori (2020) explains that symbols and language have a symbolic effect capable of creating social recognition of certain authorities. In the practice of political communication, the use of Islamic symbols, da'wah, religious figures, and religious rituals can build a perception of ideological closeness between political parties and the Muslim community. Edwards (2009) It even shows that symbolic power in public communication functions to shape social perceptions of political institutions through symbolic representation strategies. Therefore, BAMUSI's political communication strategy can be understood as an effort to build political legitimacy through religious symbolism and da'wah approaches.

In religious societies, religious symbols are also often used as a political branding instrument

to build collective identity and emotional closeness to the majority group. The use of religious symbolism allows political actors to gain moral legitimacy while building an image of alignment with the religious values of the community. However, the use of religious symbols in politics also raises debate because they can be understood differently by different social groups. Some parties see religious symbolism as a form of integration of religious values in national life, while others consider it a form of religious instrumentality for electoral interests. This difference in perspective shows that religious symbolism in politics is complex in nature and highly dependent on the process of social construction of meaning.

The difference in interpretation of religious symbolism can be explained through Entman's framing theory (2007). Framing is understood as the process of selecting and highlighting certain aspects of reality to form a social definition of an issue. In the context of BAMUSI, internal actors of the organization may interpret religious symbolism as a form of national da'wah and the harmonization of Islam with nationalism. On the contrary, external actors can interpret it as a political image strategy to reduce the stigma of PDI Perjuangan among Muslims. The difference in framing then results in a polarization of meaning between symbolism and religious substance in BAMUSI's political communication practice.

In addition, Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence is also relevant to explain how religious symbols work hegemonicly in political space. Nungesser (2017) Explains that symbolic violence occurs when forms of domination are accepted without realizing it because it is wrapped up through cultural symbols and practices that are considered legitimate. Watkins (2018) dan Olivier (2017) It shows that symbolic power works through a process of internalizing values so that society accepts certain social structures as legitimate. Thus, the religious symbolism used by BAMUSI not only functions as a medium of political communication, but also as an instrument for the formation of socio-political legitimacy.

Another perspective on symbols and language was also developed by Butler that emphasized the performative dimension of symbols in shaping social reality. Villa (2011) explained that Butler sees the meaning of symbols as always open to the possibility of reinterpretation so that symbols are never completely stable. This perspective is important to understand how the religious symbolism of BAMUSI is not always uniformly accepted by society. Some groups may see BAMUSI as a moderate and inclusive representation of nationalist Islam (Zulkifli et al., 2023), while others see the use of the religious symbol as a form of political manipulation for electoral gains.

Although various studies have addressed religious relations and political legitimacy, most previous studies have focused on macro levels such as religion-state relations, religious populism, or ideological legitimacy in global politics. Recent studies have examined Islam at the macro-political level through foreign policy narratives, Islamic identity, national interests, and electoral Islamic populism, but they have not specifically explained how Islamic symbolism is negotiated by a nationalist party wing organization such as BAMUSI in its everyday political communication and da'wah strategy (Damayanti et al., 2024; Muhtar et al., 2024). Research on religious symbolism in the context of nationalist party wing organizations in Indonesia is still relatively limited. In addition, previous research has tended to look at religious symbols normatively and ideologically, while the dimensions of political communication, counter-issue strategies, Muslim voter segmentation, and polarization of public interpretation have not been studied in depth. Thus, there is still a research gap on how religious symbolism is negotiated in the political communication practices of organizations affiliated with nationalist parties in Indonesia.

Based on these gaps, this research offers novelty by placing religious symbolism as an arena for negotiating meaning in political communication and party da'wah. This study not only sees religious symbols as attributes of religious identity, but also as an instrument of political legitimacy, the formation of public perception, and strategies to reduce political stigma among Muslim communities. This research also shows that religious symbols in BAMUSI do not have a single meaning, but continue to be produced, perceived, and debated by internal and external actors of the organization. This research is expected to expand the study of Islamic political communication in Indonesia, especially regarding the relationship between religious symbolism, political legitimacy, ideological framing, and the formation of public perception in contemporary socio-political space.

Based on this description, this study aims to: (1) analyze how religious symbolism is negotiated

in BAMUSI's political communication and da'wah strategy; (2) analyze how religious symbolism is used by BAMUSI to build political legitimacy and reduce stigma against PDI Perjuangan among Muslim voters; and (3) analyze how the difference in interpretation between internal and external actors shapes the polarization of meaning towards symbolism and religious substance in BAMUSI's political practice.

METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach (Creswell, 2014) with the constructivist paradigm (Wertz et al., 2016) to understand the construction of meaning, religious symbolism, and political communication strategies in the practice of national da'wah carried out by Baitul Muslimin Indonesia (BAMUSI). The constructivism paradigm is used because this research departs from the assumption that social reality is formed through the process of interaction, subjective experience, and interpretation of social actors of the phenomena they experience. In the perspective of constructivism, reality is not seen as something singular and objective, but rather as the result of social construction (Ritzer, 2021) influenced by cultural, political, and ideological contexts. Therefore, this approach is seen as relevant to explain how internal and external actors interpret the relationship between Islam, nationalism, and political identity in BAMUSI's political communication practice.

The research design used is a qualitative case study. Case study approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018) was chosen because this research focuses on one specific phenomenon, namely the practice of political da'wah and national communication carried out by BAMUSI as an organization of the religious wing of PDI Perjuangan. The case study allows researchers to conduct an in-depth exploration of organizational dynamics, political communication strategies used, and public responses to political da'wah activities carried out by the organization. Through this design, the research not only describes the phenomenon, but also explains the social, political, and ideological context behind the practice of BAMUSI political communication in contemporary Indonesian public spaces.

Participants in this study consisted of two main groups, namely internal informants and external informants. Internal informants are individuals who have direct involvement in organizational activities and play a role in the process of formulating, implementing, and communicating BAMUSI's national da'wah ideas. They were chosen because they were considered to have a deep understanding of the organization's political communication strategy, institutional policy direction, and the construction of religious identity built in relation to PDI Perjuangan. To maintain research ethics and identity secrecy, all informants' names are disguised using a certain code. The internal informants in this study were given the codes I-1, I-2, and I-3.

In addition to internal informants, this study also involves external informants from academics, political observers, and activists of religious organizations who have knowledge of Islamic political communication in Indonesia. External informants were selected to provide a more critical and comparative perspective on BAMUSI's political communication practices, especially in relation to the formation of Muslim public opinion towards PDI Perjuangan. The presence of external informants is also intended to enrich the perspective of the research so that the analysis is not only based on the internal narrative of the organization, but also considers the interpretation of outsiders of the symbolism and political legitimacy strategies carried out by BAMUSI. In this study, external informants were disguised with codes E-1, E-2, E-3, E-4, and E-5.

The informant selection technique was carried out using purposive sampling (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). This technique is used because research requires participants who have experience, knowledge, and direct involvement with the phenomenon being studied. Purposive sampling allows researchers to determine informants based on certain criteria, such as strategic positions in organizations, involvement in political da'wah activities, and academic or professional competence in the field of political communication and political Islam. The use of this technique aims to ensure that the data obtained is truly relevant to the research focus and is able to provide in-depth information about BAMUSI's political communication practices.

The main data collection technique in this study is in-depth interviews with a semi-structured model (Creswell, 2014). Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they provide the flexibility for researchers to explore the informant's views, experiences, and interpretations in more depth without losing focus on the research objectives. In its implementation, the researcher uses interview guidelines

as the basic framework of the question, but still provides an open dialogue space for informants to explain their experiences and views more broadly. This approach allows researchers to explore issues that arise spontaneously during interviews, deepen the answers that are considered important, and capture the dynamics of meaning negotiations that take place in BAMUSI's political communication and national da'wah practices.

Through in-depth interviews, this study seeks to understand how actors interpret BAMUSI's position as a national da'wah organization, how they interpret the relationship between Islam and nationalism, and how religious symbolism is used as a political communication strategy to build political legitimacy among Muslim communities. Interviews are also used to identify how religious symbols are produced, communicated, and received by various groups of people. Thus, interviews not only function as a tool for collecting factual data, but also as a medium to understand the processes of social construction, power relations, and the formation of political identities that develop in the practice of political da'wah of organizations.

In addition to interviews, this study also uses documentation techniques as a supporting method for data collection. Documentation is carried out on various written and visual sources, such as organizational documents, official publications, political speeches, social media content, mass media reports, articles, and other archives related to BAMUSI's activities. The use of documentation aims to strengthen the data of interview results, understand the public representation of the organization, and identify the patterns of political communication produced in the public space. Documentation data is also used as part of the triangulation process to improve the validity and credibility of the research.

The main instrument in this study is the researcher himself as a human instrument. In qualitative research, researchers have a central role in determining the focus of research, selecting informants, conducting interviews, interpreting data, and compiling research conclusions. To support the data collection process, the researcher used several auxiliary instruments in the form of interview guidelines, voice recording tools, field notes, and other documentation devices. The interview guidelines were prepared based on the focus of research which included religious symbolism, political communication strategies, political legitimacy, and the relationship between Islam and nationalism in BAMUSI's national da'wah practice.

Data analysis is carried out in stages through the process of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing (Miles et al., 2014). All interview data is first transcribed verbatim to maintain the integrity of the information. Furthermore, the researcher carried out a coding and categorization process on the main themes that emerged from the field data. The analysis is carried out in an interpretive manner by placing the data in the social and political context behind it. In this process, the researcher seeks to identify communication patterns, forms of religious symbolism, political legitimacy strategies, and the dynamics of meaning negotiation that develop in the practice of BAMUSI's political da'wah.

To ensure the validity of the data, this study uses source triangulation techniques and method triangulation. Source triangulation is carried out by comparing information obtained from internal and external informants, while triangulation methods are carried out by matching interview results with documentation data and media reports. This process aims to increase the credibility of research findings and minimize subjectivity bias in data interpretation.

Methodologically, this study places social reality as the result of intersubjective constructions formed through social interaction and political communication practices. Therefore, the research is not directed to produce statistical generalizations, but rather to gain an in-depth understanding of how religious symbolism is used as an instrument of political communication and ideological legitimacy in the context of BAMUSI's national da'wah. This approach is expected to be able to make an academic contribution to the development of the study of political communication, political Islam, and the study of religious relations and nationalism in contemporary Indonesian politics.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Negotiation of Religious Symbolism in BAMUSI's Political Communication and Da'wah Strategy

The results of the study show that religious symbolism in BAMUSI's political communication and da'wah strategy is negotiated through an integrative approach between Islam, nationalism, and the ideology of Pancasila. Based on interview data, BAMUSI does not build Islamic symbolism as an

exclusive political identity, but as a universal value compatible with nationality. Islam is positioned as a moral spirit that can go hand in hand with nationalism so that the political communication that is built emphasizes integration rather than identity polarization. These findings show that religious symbolism is not used to assert ideological boundaries between Islamic and nationalist groups, but to establish legitimacy that Islamic identity can coexist with state ideology. In the context of political communication, the strategy shows that there are efforts to reduce identity conflicts that have been inherent in the relationship between PDI Perjuangan and certain Muslim groups (Bakti, 2025). This approach has relevance to Norris' view (2015) which explains that modern political communication works through the process of forming social legitimacy interactively between political actors and society. In the context of BAMUSI, the legitimacy is built by negotiating the symbol of Islam into the framework of nationality so that religion is not positioned as an opposition to nationalism.

The negotiation of religious symbolism can also be seen from the communication strategy that is adaptive to the diversity of the Muslim community. Based on the results of the interview, BAMUSI adjusted its communication approach to the social and cultural character of the audience, both within Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah. This shows that religious symbolism is not produced singlely, but is negotiated according to the social context of the society at hand. This strategy shows that BAMUSI's political communication is flexible and dialogical, not uniform ideological communication. The findings are in line with the research of Mahmuddin and Aisyah (St. Aisyah, 2019) which emphasizes that the effectiveness of da'wah is influenced by the communicator's ability to adapt the message to the social and cultural structure of society. In BAMUSI practice, religious symbolism is not only present in the form of visual attributes or religious rhetoric, but also through contextual and interpersonal patterns of social interaction. Thus, the symbols of Islam are negotiated fluidly and not imposed in one homogeneous form of identity.

The results of the study also show that religious symbolism in BAMUSI is built through programmatic socio-religious activities. Activities such as recitations, social compensation, commemoration of Islamic holidays, and congregational worship are the main mediums of the representation of the organization's Islamic symbols. In this context, religious symbols do not stand alone as visual representations, but are attached to concrete social activities that are directly felt by society. This approach shows that religious symbolism is built through collective social experiences that connect Islamic values with people's daily practices. These findings are relevant to the research of Khairil et al. (2020) which explains that da'wah has a broad social function in building solidarity and emotional closeness of the community through empathic interpersonal communication. In the practice of BAMUSI, socio-religious activities become a space for negotiation between the political identity of the party and the religious identity of the Muslim community. Religious symbols are not only understood as ritual symbols, but also as a medium for the formation of social relations and political legitimacy.

However, this study found that the religious symbolism of BAMUSI was not interpreted singularly by the public. An external perspective shows that some of the speakers see the use of Islamic symbols as part of a purely political imagery strategy. Religious activities such as social compensation, recitation, and the use of religious attributes are perceived as an effort to build the image of PDI Perjuangan's closeness with Muslims. In this perspective, religious symbols are understood as political instruments that are pragmatic and electoral. The findings show that there is ambiguity in the negotiation of religious symbolism because symbols intended as representations of values can be read as political camouflage by some parties. This condition is related to Klimeš's argument (2022) Regarding attention populism, it is explained that symbols and visual representations in modern political communication are often used to shape public attention and perception. In the context of BAMUSI, religious symbolism is an arena for the struggle for meaning between the mission of da'wah and electoral political interests.

In addition, historical factors are also an important element in the process of negotiating BAMUSI's religious symbolism. Some of the speakers considered that the historical proximity of PDI Perjuangan to nationalist-secular groups caused the Islamic symbols used by the organization to not be fully believed as representations of substantive changes in the party. In this context, religious symbols face resistance because they are perceived to be contrary to the party's historical identity. These findings reinforce the views of Sokolov and Vasilyeva (2024) which explains that people's political perceptions are heavily influenced by historical experience so that new messages are often interpreted through

collective memory that has been formed beforehand. In the case of BAMUSI, religious symbolism had to be negotiated amid the old stigma that associated PDI Perjuangan with anti-Islamic groups. As a result, the religious symbols used by organizations are not always accepted as authentic symbols, but are often seen as defensive communication strategies to reduce political stigma.

This study also found that the negotiation of religious symbolism is carried out through the use of religious figures as mediators of political communication. BAMUSI recruited figures from NU (Nahdlatul Ulama), Muhammadiyah, and other Islamic organizations to be the liaison between the party and the Muslim community. The existence of religious figures allows Islamic symbolism to gain social legitimacy because political messages are conveyed through figures that have been trusted by the community. These findings are in line with the research of Djupe and Neiheisel (2022) which explains that the effectiveness of religion-based political communication is greatly influenced by the social legitimacy of religious communicators. In the practice of BAMUSI, religious figures become symbols of faith that allow the negotiation of Islamic identity and nationalism to take place more dialogical and persuasive. Thus, religious symbolism is represented not only through visual attributes, but also through the moral authority of the religious figures involved in the organization.

Religious Symbolism as an Instrument of Political Legitimacy and Stigma Reduction against PDI Perjuangan

The findings of the study show that religious symbolism is used by BAMUSI as a political communication strategy to build the political legitimacy of PDI Perjuangan while reducing the party's historical stigma among Muslim voters. Interview data shows that the existence of BAMUSI is positioned as a channel for Islamic representation within nationalist parties which has often been associated with secular, anti-Islamic groups, and even associated with leftist political heritage. The organization's internal resource person explained that the main function of BAMUSI is to present a da'wah-political approach that is able to bridge the relationship between PDI Perjuangan and the Muslim community through recitations, social compensation, sermons, Ramadan studies, and Islamic discussion forums. These activities show that religious symbolism is not used separately from political interests, but rather as a medium to build a party image that is more accommodating to Islamic identity. In this context, religious symbols work as communication instruments directed at reducing the psychological distance between the party and Muslims. These findings show that political legitimacy in contemporary communication practices is not only built through policy programs, but also through the management of religious symbols and identities in Muslim public spaces.

From the perspective of political communication, this practice shows that BAMUSI implements an audience-based political communication strategy that places the social identity of the audience as the basis for the formation of political messages. Hine et al. (2014) Explains that audience segmentation is the process of grouping audiences based on certain social, psychological, and behavioral characteristics so that communication can be received more effectively and persuasively (Hine et al., 2014). Gavrilov et al.(2025) adding that audience segmentation in modern political communication is not only used to map voter behavior, but also to build emotional closeness and social legitimacy towards target groups (Gavrilov et al., 2025). In the context of BAMUSI, religious symbolism is used to build an emotional relationship with the Muslim community which has historically had an ambiguous relationship with PDI Perjuangan. Therefore, the use of Islamic symbols is not only directed to gain electoral support, but also to manage public perception of the party's political identity. These findings suggest that religious symbolism in BAMUSI works at the level of identity representation and the production of socio-political legitimacy simultaneously.

The research also found that religious symbolism in BAMUSI is produced through social representation strategies that highlight the involvement of Muslim figures in the organisational structure and activities of the party. The research resource person explained that BAMUSI actively displays the involvement of elements of Muhammadiyah, NU, Muslim academics, and Islamic figures in various organizational activities to show that PDI Perjuangan has a closeness to the Muslim community. The strategy shows that religious symbolism is not only manifested through religious rituals, but also through social representations of actors who have religious legitimacy in the eyes of the public. In practice, the symbolic approach is carried out in an accommodating manner according to the character of different Muslim audiences. When in the Muhammadiyah environment, BAMUSI uses an approach

that emphasizes Islamic modernism and intellectual discourse, while in the NU environment, the approach is carried out through traditional culture and social symbols of Islamic boarding schools. This shows that religious symbolism is produced contextually based on the social identity of the audience.

This strategy is relevant to Communication Accommodation Theory which explains that the effectiveness of communication is influenced by the communicator's ability to adapt symbols, language, and communication style to the characteristics of the audience. Giles explained that convergence communication is carried out to build social closeness and increase audience acceptance of the message conveyed (Giles, 2016). Gallois and Giles add that communication accommodations allow social actors to reduce identity distance through the adjustment of symbols and patterns of interaction with target groups (Gallois & Giles, 2015). In the political context, Dragojevic et al. emphasized that accommodative communication can increase the effectiveness of political persuasion if it is done contextually according to the social identity of the audience (Dragojevic et al., 2015). This can be seen in the practice of BAMUSI which adjusts symbolic approaches and religious communication based on different cultures of Islamic organizations. Thus, religious symbolism in BAMUSI is not just a visual attribute, but part of a political communication strategy based on the accommodation of Muslim social identity.

In addition to building symbolic closeness, this study also shows that religious symbolism is used by BAMUSI to form a substantive image that PDI Perjuangan does not contradict Islamic values. The research resource person explained that BAMUSI seeks to present the "spirit of Islam" in the party through da'wah activities, Islamic studies, and Muslim cadre development. In this context, religious symbolism is not only directed at external society, but also at the party's internal cadres so that nationalist identity and religious identity can be negotiated harmoniously. These findings show that BAMUSI performs an integrative function between political nationalism and Islamic religiosity. The strategy shows that religious symbolism is positioned as a medium of identity integration, not just a tool for electoral political mobilization.

This phenomenon strengthens Bahtiar Effendy's argument that the transformation of Islamic politics in Indonesia is moving from a formalistic approach to a substantive and accommodating approach to the modern national state (Bahtiar Effendy, 2011). According to Effendy, Islam is no longer positioned solely as a formal state ideology, but as a source of ethical and moral values that can coexist with the national political system. In the context of BAMUSI, the accommodation process can be seen in the nationalist party's efforts to present Islamic symbols and values through a da'wah-political-based wing organization. The findings of this study show that Islamic accommodation in contemporary politics does not only take place at the level of state policy, but also at the level of micro-political communication through religious symbolism, audience targeting, and management of Muslim public perception.

The research also found that religious symbolism was used by BAMUSI as an image rehabilitation strategy against the historical stigma of PDI Perjuangan among Muslims. An internal source of the organization explained that the existence of BAMUSI aims to break the perception that PDI Perjuangan is synonymous with anti-Islam groups or has closeness to leftist ideology. Therefore, activities such as recitation, social compensation, Ramadan da'wah, and mosque activities are positioned as important instruments in building a new image of the party in the eyes of the Muslim public. In practice, religious symbolism is used to create an emotional association between the party and the religious identity of the community. The strategy shows that religious symbolism works as a tool for repositioning political identity in the public sphere.

This practice is relevant to the concept of political marketing which Bouranta explains that the formation of a modern political image depends not only on policy programs, but also on the ability of organizations to build emotional closeness to voters through symbols and social identities (Buranta, 2025). Religious symbols in this context are part of political branding that is used to create the perception that the party has sensitivity to the aspirations of Muslims. Rosidi also explained that contemporary da'wah in Indonesia is increasingly related to the formation of social legitimacy and political influence in the Muslim public sphere (Rosidi, 2021). In the context of BAMUSI, da'wah is not only understood as a normative religious activity, but also as a medium of political communication directed at building the party's legitimacy in front of the Muslim community.

The findings of the study also show that the religious symbolism of BAMUSI is produced

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through digital media and virtual public spaces. Islamic study activities, Ramadan discussions, and intellectual forums broadcast through YouTube show that the organization seeks to expand the political legitimacy of the party through religiosity-based digital communication. This shows that religious symbolism is no longer limited to conventional ritual spaces, but is also produced and disseminated through digital media. This strategy is in line with the transformation of digital da'wah explained by Briandana et al. that modern Muslims are more receptive to religious communication that is flexible, interactive, and social media-based (Briandana et al., 2020). Aliman et al. also explained that political and religious organizations must adapt their communication strategies to the media consumption patterns of modern digital society (Aliman et al., 2025). Purba and Lusia added that digital da'wah functions as a medium for the formation of social legitimacy and symbolic relations in virtual public spaces (Ancient & Lucia, 2026). The religious symbolism in BAMUSI shows the integration between digital da'wah and modern political communication.

However, this study also found that the effectiveness of BAMUSI's religious symbolism is still debated by some external informants. Some speakers assessed that the organization's activities are still at a symbolic level and have not fully touched the substantive issues of Muslims. The criticism arises because some activities are perceived to display more religious attributes than to offer concrete solutions to the socio-economic problems of the Muslim community. In this context, religious symbolism is seen as potentially a tool for political imagery if it is not followed by a real social transformation agenda. These findings show a tension between the use of religious symbols as a strategy for political legitimacy and the increasing political literacy of the Muslim community.

This condition is relevant to the view of Mochla et al. who explain that modern society is not easily persuaded through identity symbols alone, but requires political experiences that are relevant to their social needs (Mochla et al., 2025). Moss et al. also emphasized that audience targeting is only effective if the communication strategy is followed by a substantive approach according to the needs of the target group (Moss et al., 2009). Jones et al. add that audience segmentation must be followed by concrete social interventions for communication to result in real behavioral change (Jones et al., 2019). Thus, the main challenge of BAMUSI is not only to expand the use of religious symbols in political communication, but also to build substantive credibility that is able to strengthen the party's legitimacy in the eyes of the Muslim community.

Differences in Interpretation of Internal and External Actors in Shaping the Polarization of Meaning to the Symbolism and Religious Substance of BAMUSI

The results of the study show that religious symbolism in the political practice of Baitul Muslimin Indonesia (BAMUSI) is not interpreted singularly, but rather becomes an arena for interpretation contestation between internal and external actors. These differences in interpretation form a polarization of meaning regarding whether the Islamic symbols used by BAMUSI are understood as representations of substantive religious values or merely instruments of political imagery. In the perspective of internal actors, religious symbolism is positioned as a medium of da'wah, value communication, and a strategy for the integration of Islam with nationalism. On the contrary, some external actors interpret the symbol as a form of political camouflage aimed at building electoral legitimacy for PDI Perjuangan among Muslims. These findings show that religious symbols in the political space are never neutral, but are always produced and debated in different power relations, social experiences, and historical memories.

From an internal perspective, BAMUSI seeks to build a narrative that the religious activities carried out are not formalistic symbolism, but a representation of substantive Islamic values that are in harmony with Pancasila and nationalism. Internal informants assert that the organization does not fight for the symbols of Islam exclusively, but emphasizes universal values such as tolerance, inclusivity, and Islam *raḥmatan li al-ʿālamīn*. This position shows the existence of a substantivistic tendency as explained by Bahtiar Effendy (Bahtiar Effendy, 2011), that the transformation of Islamic politics in Indonesia is moving from a formalistic orientation to an ethical-substantive approach that emphasizes the compatibility of Islam with democracy and the nation-state. In this context, religious symbols are understood as a means of social communication to convey inclusive and moderate Islamic values, not as an attempt to formalize religion in politics. This perspective can be seen from the explanation of internal informants who placed religious symbols as a medium to build national da'wah while reducing

the stigma of PDI Perjuangan among Muslims.

However, even though symbols are normatively reduced as a secondary aspect, organizational practices still show the intensive use of religious symbols through recitation, the Prophet's Birthday, congregational prayers, compensation, the use of Islamic attributes, and the presence of religious figures in political activities. This condition shows the ambiguity between substantive discourse and symbolic practice. Symbols are still produced because they have strong representational and emotional power in building closeness with the Muslim community. This phenomenon is in line with Yob's view (2008) which explains that religious symbols and language have the ability to connect abstract values with concrete social experiences so that they are able to create a collective identity and a sense of religious togetherness. In the context of BAMUSI, religious symbols are a political communication tool that bridges Islamic identity with the image of religious nationalism that PDI Perjuangan wants to build. This shows that symbols serve not only as religious expressions, but also as instruments of social and political communication.

On the other hand, the external perspective reveals a much more critical interpretation of the religious symbolism of BAMUSI. A number of external informants view the organization's religious activities as a form of instrumental political imagery. BAMUSI is perceived more as a "party accessory" than a da'wah organization that has a substantive contribution to the issues of Muslims. The criticism arises because the religious symbols displayed are considered not always followed by a political agenda that actually fights for the interests of Muslims. In this perspective, the symbol loses substantive legitimacy and is only understood as a surface display directed at shaping public perception of PDI Perjuangan's closeness to the Muslim community. This interpretation shows that the meaning of symbols is greatly influenced by the level of public trust in the consistency between symbolic representation and political practices carried out.

Such external interpretations can be explained through theory *symbolic power* Pierre Bourdieu placed the symbol as an instrument of production of social and political legitimacy. Bourdieu (Riegel, 2015) explains that symbolic power works through language, culture, and social representation so that society accepts certain constructions as something natural. Hanks (Hanks, 2005) emphasizing that language and symbols are the main medium in the formation of social legitimacy because they determine how authority is received in a social field. In the context of BAMUSI, the Islamic symbol functions as a representation device used to build a religious image and reduce the historical stigma against PDI Perjuangan as a party that is considered far from Islamic aspirations. However, when the public views that the symbol has no correlation with substantive practice, then *symbolic power* experience delegitimization and turn into a source of social suspicion. This condition suggests that the effectiveness of symbols depends heavily on consistency between symbolic representation and tangible political action (Wacquant, 2013).

Furthermore, some external actors even interpret the religious symbolism of BAMUSI as a form of "political camouflage". The use of religious attributes, Islamic rituals, and ummah narratives is considered a strategy to create an impression of ideological closeness to Muslims without any substantive change in the party's political orientation. This perspective is in line with the concept *social camouflage* developed by Brighenti and Castelli (2016), that symbols can be used to disguise identity distance and gain social legitimacy in public spaces. In political practice, religious symbols have performative power because they are able to build strong moral and emotional perceptions in the midst of religious communities. However, when the public sees a discrepancy between symbols and political reality, they actually raise skepticism and polarization of interpretation. These findings show that religious symbols can experience a crisis of legitimacy when perceived as more dominant as an imagery strategy than an authentic representation of values.

The polarization of meaning shows that religious symbolism in BAMUSI is in a dynamic socio-political negotiation space. Internal actors produce symbols with the aim of establishing the legitimacy of national da'wah and demonstrating the compatibility of Islam with nationalism. Instead, external actors interpret symbols based on historical experience, political perception, and level of trust in the party. As a result, symbols that are intended as representations of inclusive values can be understood as a form of image manipulation. These findings show that the meaning of symbols is never fully determined by the producers of symbols, but is highly dependent on the processes of social interpretation that develop in society. This perspective is in line with the theory Framing Entman

(Entman, 1993) which explains that social reality is formed through the process of selection and prominence of certain aspects so as to produce different social definitions of the same object. In this context, the symbolism of BAMUSI becomes a framing object that is produced differently by internal and external actors.

The results of this study also show a close relationship between religious symbolism and Indonesian political historical memory. Most of the criticism of BAMUSI is not only directed at the symbols used, but also at the history of the relationship between PDI Perjuangan and Islamic groups. In this context, the religious symbol of BAMUSI is perceived as an attempt to reconstruct the image of the old stigma regarding secular nationalism and accusations of anti-Islam. These findings reinforce the argument that religious symbols in Indonesian politics cannot be separated from the historical context and collective identity of Muslim communities. Therefore, BAMUSI's religious symbolism is not just a contemporary political communication practice, but also part of the broader ideological identity negotiation between Islam and nationalism in Indonesia. This perspective shows that religious symbols work as an arena for the battle of meaning between political legitimacy and religious authenticity.

The novelty of this research lies in the analysis of religious symbolism as an arena for the contestation of meaning between internal and external actors in the organization of the nationalist party wing. Previous research generally placed religious symbols only as an instrument of political mobilization or *political branding*, while this study shows that symbolism is also a space for the production, negotiation, and polarization of complex meanings. Religious symbols not only serve to build political legitimacy, but also create ambiguities between da'wah, identity representation, and pragmatic interests of power. Thus, this study expands the study of Islamic political communication by placing symbolism as a multidimensional and continuously debated social practice in the contemporary Indonesian democratic space.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that religious symbolism in the practice of political communication of Baitul Muslimin Indonesia (BAMUSI) is an arena for complex meaning negotiation between da'wah, political legitimacy, and electoral communication strategies. The findings of the study show that BAMUSI builds Islamic symbolism through an integrative approach that places Islam, nationalism, and Pancasila as compatible and mutually reinforcing identities. Religious symbolism is not only manifested in the form of rituals and religious attributes, but also through socio-religious activities, the use of religious figures, interpersonal communication, and digital da'wah directed at building emotional closeness with Muslim communities. In this context, religious symbols function as an instrument of political communication that is used to build socio-political legitimacy while reducing the historical stigma against PDI Perjuangan as a party that has been perceived to have a distance from Islamic groups. These findings confirm that the relationship between Islam and politics in the context of nationalist parties in Indonesia no longer moves solely at the ideological-formalistic level, but develops towards symbolic negotiations, accommodation of social identity, and integration of da'wah with modern political legitimacy strategies.

This study also found that religious symbolism in BAMUSI is not interpreted singularly, but becomes an object of interpretation polarization between internal and external actors. Internal actors interpret religious symbols as a medium of national da'wah and inclusive substantive Islamic representation, while some external actors view it as an instrument of political imagery and electoral camouflage. These differences in interpretation suggest that the effectiveness of religious symbols in political communication is strongly influenced by historical experience, levels of public belief, and consistency between symbolic representations and substantive political practices. Thus, this study shows that religious symbolism in politics is not stable and neutral, but continues to be produced, negotiated, and debated in a dynamic socio-political space. The main contribution of this research lies in the development of an Islamic political communication perspective that places religious symbolism not only as an instrument of political branding, but also as an arena for contesting meaning, producing legitimacy, and shaping public perception in contemporary Indonesian democracy. This research also expands the study of the relationship between religion and politics by showing that nationalist party wing organizations can use religious symbolism flexibly and accommodatively without being completely trapped in antagonistic identity politics.

However, this study still has limitations because it focuses on a qualitative approach based on

interviews and organizational case studies so that it is not able to quantitatively measure the influence of religious symbolism on the political behavior of Muslim communities more broadly. Therefore, further research can develop a mixed methods approach or political survey to measure the effectiveness of religious symbolism on changes in public perception, electoral behavior, and the level of legitimacy of political parties among Muslim voters. In addition, a comparative study of the organization of the religious wing of other nationalist parties is also important to understand how religious symbolism is negotiated in the context of Indonesian politics that is increasingly digitized and competitive. Thus, this research is expected to make a theoretical and empirical contribution to the development of the study of political communication, political Islam, as well as the study of religious relations, nationalism, and the legitimacy of power in contemporary Indonesian democracy.

Declarations

MMM contributed to the research conception, field investigation, qualitative analysis, and manuscript preparation. AMFB participated in theoretical framing, methodological assessment, and scholarly revision. AP contributed to the interpretation of political communication, literature evaluation, and refinement of the manuscript. All authors examined and endorsed the final version, accepting collective responsibility for its academic integrity. The authors declare no competing interests. ChatGPT (OpenAI) and Claude (Anthropic) were utilized to improve linguistic accuracy, academic clarity, and writing consistency, whereas Scopus AI (Elsevier) facilitated preliminary exploration of relevant scholarly publications. All AI-assisted suggestions were independently verified, and the tools were not employed to generate interview evidence, perform thematic coding, or formulate research conclusions. The study involved eight informants whose identities were protected through coded identifiers. Supporting documentary sources are acknowledged in the manuscript, while interview records remain subject to confidentiality and applicable access restrictions.

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