

# Digital Political Rhetoric of Moderate Islamic Mass-Based Parties in Southeast Asia: A Critical Discourse Analysis of PAN (Indonesia) and AMANAH (Malaysia)

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**Abstract.** The development of digital technology has transformed political communication practices among moderate Islamic political parties in Southeast Asia. The National Mandate Party (PAN) in Indonesia and the State Trust Party (AMANAH) in Malaysia utilize digital media to construct political images, expand support bases, and promote narratives of Islamic moderation amid the rise of identity politics and religious populism. This study analyzes the digital political rhetoric of PAN and AMANAH using Teun A. van Dijk's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Employing a qualitative method with case study approach, the research examines social media posts between 2022 and 2025. The analysis focuses on three dimensions: textual structure, social cognition, and social context. The findings indicate that both parties promote moderate Islamic values through discourses of inclusivity, democracy, nationalism, and tolerance. However, their rhetorical orientations differ. PAN combines Islamic symbolism with national political pragmatism, while AMANAH emphasizes progressive Islamic reformism and multicultural values within the Malaysian context. In the digital sphere, both parties use social media to disseminate ideological narratives, shape leadership images, and negotiate contemporary Islamic identities. The study concludes that digital political rhetoric functions not only as a communication strategy but also as an ideological instrument through which moderate Islamic parties maintain political legitimacy in the increasingly competitive digital political landscape of Southeast Asia.

**Keywords:** digital political rhetoric, moderate Islamic parties, PAN, AMANAH

**Abstrak.** Perkembangan teknologi digital telah mengubah praktik komunikasi politik di kalangan partai-partai politik Islam moderat di Asia Tenggara. Partai Amanat Nasional (PAN) di Indonesia dan Parti Amanah Negara (AMANAH) di Malaysia memanfaatkan media digital untuk membangun citra politik, memperluas basis dukungan, dan mempromosikan narasi moderasi Islam di tengah maraknya politik identitas dan populisme agama. Penelitian ini menganalisis retorika politik digital PAN dan AMANAH menggunakan Analisis Wacana Kritis (CDA) karya Teun A. van Dijk. Menggunakan metode kualitatif dengan pendekatan studi kasus, penelitian ini meneliti postingan media sosial, antara tahun 2022 dan 2025. Analisis ini berfokus pada tiga dimensi: struktur tekstual, kognisi sosial, dan konteks sosial. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa kedua partai tersebut mempromosikan nilai-nilai Islam moderat melalui wacana inklusivitas, demokrasi, nasionalisme, dan toleransi. Namun, orientasi retorika mereka berbeda. PAN memadukan simbolisme Islam dengan pragmatisme politik nasional, sementara AMANAH menekankan reformisme Islam progresif dan nilai-nilai multikultural dalam konteks Malaysia. Di ranah digital, kedua partai tersebut memanfaatkan media sosial untuk menyebarluaskan narasi ideologis, membentuk citra kepemimpinan, dan menegosiasikan identitas Islam kontemporer. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa retorika politik digital tidak hanya berfungsi sebagai strategi komunikasi, tetapi juga sebagai instrumen ideologis yang digunakan partai-partai Islam moderat untuk mempertahankan legitimasi politik di tengah lanskap politik digital Asia Tenggara yang semakin kompetitif.

**Kata Kunci:** Retorika politik digital, partai Islam moderat, PAN, AMANAH.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Digital transformation over the past two decades has brought about fundamental changes in communication patterns (Wumbu et al., 2025). These changes are taking place at the national, regional, and global levels, including in Southeast Asia. The development of the internet, social media, and digital communication technologies has not only transformed the way people access political information but has also become a key arena for shaping public opinion, for example (Idris, 2025). This could alter the communication strategies employed by political communicators, such as political parties, including in terms of image-building, influencing public opinion, and securing electoral support (Yulius Cobis & Cangara, 2023). Whereas in the past political communication was primarily conducted through conventional media such as television, radio, newspapers, and in-person campaigns, in the digital age it has evolved to become more interactive, rapid, widespread, and virtual network-based. The digital space has now become the primary arena for the production and distribution of political discourse, which takes place continuously without the constraints of time or space.

Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter/X, TikTok, and YouTube have become essential tools in contemporary democratic practices, such as public participation, both in general and among Generation Z (Suryawijaya et al., 2025). These platforms enable political parties to establish direct communication with the public without having to rely entirely on mainstream media. The presence of digital media creates a pattern of political communication that is more personal, visual, and emotional. In this context, political communication is no longer merely the presentation of a party's platform or ideology, but also involves the production of symbols, political branding, the management of public emotions, and the formation of collective identity. Digital politics also enables the emergence of new phenomena such as influencer-based campaigns, hashtag wars, meme politics, and mass mobilization through virtual communities.

In Southeast Asia, the development of digital political communication is progressing rapidly alongside the growing number of internet and social media users. Indonesia and Malaysia are among the countries with high levels of social media usage in the region. This has turned the digital space into a crucial arena for political competition, particularly during election seasons and power struggles. In such a

situation, political parties are required to adapt to the changing landscape of public communication. Digital communication strategies have become essential for political parties to maintain their relevance, reach young voters, and build political legitimacy in an increasingly digitized society.

In the context of Islamic politics in Southeast Asia, digital transformation presents both new challenges and opportunities. Islamic parties are not only competing for political power but also for moral authority and religious interpretation in the digital sphere. In this context, the use of social media is quite intensive, leading to an interplay between media and politics (Lim, 2024). Social media enables the rapid and widespread dissemination of various Islamic narratives, including narratives of Islamic moderation, religious populism, conservatism, and even extremism. Therefore, moderate Islamic parties face a complex situation as they must maintain their Islamic identity while demonstrating a commitment to democracy, pluralism, tolerance, and religious moderation.

This phenomenon is clearly evident in the political communication practices of National Mandate Party (PAN) in Indonesia and the State Trust Party (AMANAH) in Malaysia. PAN, for example, implements its political communication strategy for campaigns through the use of social media (Hevy Alifiyah et al., 2024); (Rijalussaumi & Irma, 2025). Both parties can be categorized as representatives of moderate Islamic parties that seek to integrate Islamic values with modern democracy. PAN was founded during Indonesia's 1998 reform era with a modernist Islamic ideological foundation and maintains historical ties to the Muhammadiyah organization. As a party born out of the spirit of reform, PAN seeks to build a political identity that is open, inclusive, and nationalist-religious. Throughout its political journey, PAN has not only utilized Islamic symbols but has also presented an image of a party that is adaptable to the developments of Indonesia's political modernity.

Meanwhile, AMANAH in Malaysia emerged as a progressive Islamic party born out of internal dynamics within the Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), specifically in 2015 (Besar, 2021). The emergence of AMANAH cannot be separated from the ideological conflict between conservative and progressive factions within PAS. The progressive faction that later founded AMANAH sought to build a more inclusive, democratic, and multicultural model of Islamic politics. In the context of Malaysia's multi-ethnic and multi-religious politics, AMANAH strives to present a moderate face of Islam that is compatible with the principles of modern democracy.

Both PAN and AMANAH share a common goal of promoting a moderate image of Islam amid the rise of

identity politics and religious populism in Southeast Asia. In recent years, the Southeast Asian region has seen an increase in the use of religious sentiment in political contests. Religion-based identity politics is often used to build group loyalty, attack political opponents, and mobilize mass support. Digital media accelerates the spread of these identity narratives because social media algorithms tend to prioritize content that is emotional, provocative, and controversial. As a result, narratives of Islamic moderation often find themselves at a disadvantage compared to more aggressive and populist conservative narratives.

The development of digital media has also led to fundamental changes in the practice of political rhetoric. In the digital age, political rhetoric is no longer limited to formal speeches, political debates, or press statements, but is produced on a massive scale across various digital platforms. Politicians and political parties now use social media to convey political messages directly to the public. Digital political language tends to be more concise, symbolic, visual, and emotional than conventional political rhetoric. The use of short videos, viral slogans, political memes, and eye-catching visual designs has become an essential part of digital political communication strategies.

In addition, digital political communication also emphasizes the aspect of political personalization. Party leaders are portrayed not only as formal political actors but also as public figures who are close to the people. In this context, social media is used to build an image of leadership that is humanistic, religious, modern, and relatable to the younger generation. This strategy is evident in the political communication practices of both PAN and AMANAH, which actively utilize digital platforms to build emotional connections with the public.

However, the use of digital media by moderate Islamic parties is not merely a technical matter of political communication, but is also linked to the production of ideology and the contestation of socio-political meanings. In the digital space, political parties do not merely convey information but also construct a specific social reality through language, symbols, and political narratives. Therefore, digital political rhetoric must be understood as an ideological practice tied to power relations and the formation of social identity.

This phenomenon is important to examine because moderate Islamic parties face a double bind in digital political communication. On the one hand, they must maintain their religious legitimacy in the eyes of Muslim voters by continuing to demonstrate their commitment to Islamic values. On the other hand, they are also required to prove that Islam is

compatible with democracy, pluralism, and the rights of citizens in a modern state. The tension between religious identity and these democratic demands poses a major challenge for moderate Islamic parties in developing their digital political rhetoric.

In an academic context, research on digital political communication has grown significantly in recent years. Previous studies have shown that digital media plays a crucial role in shaping public opinion, political mobilization, and the transformation of modern democracy. Social media serves not only as a means of communication but also as an arena for the exercise of power and the contestation of political ideologies. Furthermore, various studies have also shown that the digital sphere has a significant influence on increasing political polarization and the spread of religious populism.

On the other hand, Teun A. van Dijk's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach is widely used to examine the relationship between language, ideology, and power in political communication. Van Dijk's approach views discourse as a social practice that is not neutral but is linked to specific ideological interests. Through this approach, political language can be analyzed not only at the text level but also at the level of social cognition and the social context underpinning it. Therefore, van Dijk's Critical Discourse Analysis serves as a relevant approach for examining how moderate Islamic parties construct digital political rhetoric amidst the political dynamics of Southeast Asia.

Nevertheless, research specifically comparing the digital political rhetoric of moderate Islamic parties in Southeast Asia remains relatively limited. Most previous studies have focused primarily on a single country or a specific party. Studies on digital Islamic political communication also often highlight populist or conservative groups more than moderate Islamic parties. In fact, moderate Islamic parties play a crucial role in maintaining a balance between religious identity and democracy in the Southeast Asian region.

This study poses the following central question: How do PAN and AMANAH construct moderate Islamic digital political rhetoric in Southeast Asian digital media spaces? This question is crucial for understanding how moderate Islamic parties negotiate political identity amid the development of digital democracy, the rise of identity politics, and the transformation of contemporary political communication. Furthermore, this study is expected to make a theoretical contribution to the development of digital political communication studies, studies of moderate Islamic parties, and the application of Critical Discourse Analysis in understanding digital political practices in Southeast Asia.

The rapid expansion of digital media has

fundamentally transformed contemporary political communication. Recent scholarship demonstrates that social media platforms are no longer merely channels for disseminating political information but have evolved into arenas for constructing political identities, shaping public opinion, and contesting ideological narratives. Studies on digital political communication consistently show that political actors increasingly rely on visual content, personalization, emotional appeals, and interactive engagement strategies to attract public attention and mobilize supporters in highly competitive digital environments ((Medina Serrano et al., 2020); (Chan & Yi, 2024).

The growing importance of social media in political processes has also altered the relationship between political parties and citizens. Recent studies indicate that platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and X facilitate direct communication between political actors and audiences, particularly younger voters, while simultaneously enabling the rapid circulation of political messages and the formation of online political communities (Ruess et al., 2023); (Yulius Cobis & Cangara, 2023). In this context, digital communication functions not only as a campaign instrument but also as a mechanism for constructing legitimacy, political branding, and ideological positioning. The increasing platformization of political communication has encouraged political actors to adapt their messages to algorithmic logics that prioritize engagement, emotional resonance, and visibility, thereby reshaping the way political narratives are produced and consumed in digital spaces (KhosraviNik, 2022).

Another significant strand of literature highlights the growing role of discourse, narrative framing, and symbolic representation in digital political communication. Research employing Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), particularly the framework developed by Teun A. van Dijk, emphasizes that language, ideology, and power are deeply intertwined in digital communication practices. Political actors strategically employ narratives, symbols, and rhetorical structures to legitimize specific political agendas and influence public perceptions (Anshorah & Khotimah, 2025);. This perspective suggests that digital communication should not be viewed merely as a technological phenomenon but also as an ideological arena where competing actors struggle to define political realities and shape public consciousness.

Recent scholarship also points to the increasing significance of religious narratives within digital political communication. Studies conducted in Muslim-majority societies reveal that religious symbols and discourses are frequently mobilized to construct political legitimacy, strengthen collective

identities, and negotiate ideological competition in online environments (Hasan, 2022). At the same time, the rise of identity politics and political polarization has encouraged political actors to strategically frame religious narratives either to mobilize support or to project images of moderation, inclusivity, and democratic commitment. Research on digital Islam further demonstrates that social media has become an important arena for contesting religious authority, promoting ideological agendas, and disseminating competing interpretations of Islam in contemporary society (Bukhari, 2025).

Studies on political rhetoric provide additional insights into how political actors construct persuasive narratives in the digital era. Drawing upon Aristotelian concepts of ethos, pathos, and logos, contemporary rhetorical studies show that political persuasion increasingly operates through multimodal communication involving text, images, videos, hashtags, and audience interaction (Trisnaningtyas & Anshori, 2026) (Trisnaningtyas & Anshori, 2026). Digital platforms amplify rhetorical strategies by enabling personalization, emotional engagement, and symbolic communication, thereby strengthening the capacity of political actors to cultivate political identities and maintain public support.

Although these studies have significantly enriched the understanding of digital political communication, several limitations remain. First, most existing studies focus on political communication practices in general or examine individual political leaders rather than political parties as collective ideological actors. Second, the literature remains heavily dominated by Western democratic contexts, while comparative studies involving political parties in Southeast Asia are still relatively limited. Third, research concerning Islamic political parties frequently focuses on electoral behavior, political Islam, populism, or campaign strategies, while paying less attention to how digital rhetoric is employed to construct and disseminate narratives of Islamic moderation. Fourth, although Critical Discourse Analysis has been widely utilized to investigate media discourse, religious narratives, and political communication, there is still limited research that integrates digital political communication, political rhetoric, and Islamic moderation within a single analytical framework. Fifth, existing studies rarely conduct comparative analyses of moderate Islamic political parties operating within different national and socio-political contexts, particularly in Southeast Asia, where Islam, democracy, and digital media interact in unique ways.

These limitations reveal an important research gap in the current literature. Empirically, there is a scarcity of comparative studies examining how moderate Islamic political parties construct political

rhetoric through digital media across different Southeast Asian countries. Theoretically, previous studies tend to treat digital political communication, political rhetoric, and Islamic moderation as separate fields of inquiry rather than interconnected dimensions of contemporary political discourse. Methodologically, the application of van Dijk's Critical Discourse Analysis has largely focused on news media, religious organizations, or individual political figures, leaving the digital discourse of political parties relatively underexplored. Contextually, limited attention has been paid to how moderate Islamic parties navigate political polarization and identity politics through digital communication strategies in Muslim-majority democracies.

To address these gaps, the present study examines and compares the digital political rhetoric of PAN in Indonesia and AMANAH in Malaysia. Both parties represent moderate Islamic political forces that operate within distinct political environments but share similar commitments to democratic participation, religious moderation, and inclusive political discourse. By employing Teun A. van Dijk's Critical Discourse Analysis, this study investigates how narratives of Islamic moderation are constructed, reproduced, and legitimized through digital communication practices on social media platforms.

The novelty of this research lies in several aspects. First, it offers a comparative cross-national analysis of two moderate Islamic political parties in Southeast Asia, an area that remains insufficiently explored in the literature on digital political communication. Second, the study integrates three analytical dimensions, digital political communication, political rhetoric, and Islamic moderation into a comprehensive framework for understanding contemporary political discourse. Third, it extends the application of van Dijk's Critical Discourse Analysis from media and individual political actors to political parties as institutional producers of digital discourse. Fourth, the research contributes to the growing scholarship on digital Islam by demonstrating how narratives of moderation are strategically constructed and communicated as political resources in an era characterized by polarization, algorithmic amplification, and identity-based political competition. Consequently, this study contributes both theoretically and empirically to broader discussions on religion, political rhetoric, and digital democracy in contemporary Muslim societies.

## 2. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative method with case study approach. The focus of the research is the digital political rhetoric of PAN and AMANAH in

digital media during the 2022–2025 period.

The data sources for this study were obtained from the official social media accounts of PAN and AMANAH. The 2022–2025 period was selected because it demonstrates a high intensity of digital political communication both before and after elections in Indonesia and Malaysia. Data collection techniques include digital documentation and social media observation.

The data analysis technique used was van Dijk's critical discourse analysis. Teun A. van Dijk's Critical Discourse Analysis. Van Dijk's critical discourse analysis focuses its discussion on three main components: text, social cognition, and context (Eriyanto, 2011).

## 3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The research findings indicate that PAN and AMANAH utilize digital media as a strategic tool in building the image of a modernist Islamic party that is moderate, inclusive, and adaptable to the developments of contemporary digital democracy. In this context, as noted by (Yulius Cobis & Cangara, 2023), the party actively utilizes digital platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and Twitter/X. In reality, the use of these social media platforms is not merely for electoral campaigning, but more importantly, to serve as a space for the production of political identity that negotiates the relationship between Islam, nationalism, and modernity, specifically for PAN in Indonesia and AMANAH in Malaysia.

Based on an analysis of PAN's social media content, it was found that PAN consistently strives to use language that emphasizes optimism regarding national development, social collaboration, and youth participation. Terms such as a youth, moderation, and public welfare can be interpreted as dominant keywords shaping the party's image. The use of this vocabulary demonstrates that PAN seeks to present itself as an Islamic party that is not exclusive and is not trapped in rigid religious identity rhetoric.

One of PAN's Instagram posts featured simple, youth-friendly language. Furthermore, the thumbnail featured a young, non-Muslim person.

Picture 1. Post to young people



Source: Instagram of @amanatnasional, PAN, July 25, 2024

Another example is a post about Christmas and New Year's Day that links Indonesia's diversity. The message is that diversity must be preserved. This demonstrates PAN's moderation.

Picture 2. On Christmas and New Year's Day



Source: Instagram of @amanatnasional, PAN, December 25, 2025

These findings reveal a transformation in the political communication patterns of Islamic parties in the digital age. Whereas in the past Islamic parties tended to employ formal, ideological, and symbolic rhetoric, in the context of social media this rhetoric has evolved to become more flexible, visual, populist, and communicative. PAN appears to recognize that digital audiences, particularly urban youth, prefer political messages that are simple, emotional, and easily shareable over complex ideological narratives.

From a digital political communication perspective, this strategy can be understood as an

adaptation to shifts in voter behavior in the social media era. As the largest group of digital media users, the younger generation exhibits more fluid political characteristics; they are not strongly tied to party identities and tend to evaluate politics based on emotional connection, the visual appeal of figures, and practical issues relevant to daily life. Consequently, PAN employs a communication strategy that emphasizes a modern, creative party image closely aligned with the needs of the younger generation.

This study found that PAN's digital rhetoric reflects a blend of modernist Islamic symbols and Indonesian nationalism. Islam is not presented in a formalistic manner through Sharia slogans or exclusive religious symbols, but rather through moral narratives related to social welfare, political ethics, community empowerment, and economic development. This approach indicates that PAN seeks to build political legitimacy through a substantive image of Islam that is more acceptable within Indonesia's pluralistic society.

In a text-structural analysis, PAN tends to use language that is light, simple, and optimistic. Their rhetoric is persuasive in nature, employing a soft populist approach. The language used is not overly ideological or confrontational, but rather communicative and designed to foster an emotional connection with the digital public. This strategy is evident through the use of short slogans, creative visuals, short videos, and interactive content that is easily shareable on social media. According to research of (Nasoha et al., 2025), modernist Islamic parties in Indonesia appear to be shifting their communication strategies from formal ideological rhetoric toward a more visual and popular form of political communication that is grounded in an emotional connection with the digital public.

Examining PAN's social media rhetoric more closely, one can discern a party that remains deeply conscious of its Muhammadiyah roots and the intellectual tradition those roots carry. That tradition stretches back to Ahmad Dahlan and his distinctive synthesis of Egyptian reformism drawing on Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida with the Javanese cultural world of the late nineteenth century, a moment when modernist Muslims were striving to overcome the colonial feudal order and to challenge the Sufi-Ulama teachings that had shaped Indonesian Islam since the earliest waves of Islamisation in the fifteenth century. The founding figure of PAN, Amien Rais, himself embodied this heritage, earning his reputation as a pre-eminent Islamic intellectual precisely through his engagement with political Islam and its reformist possibilities (Ricklefs, 2012).

What emerges from this lineage is a characteristic rhetorical model in which Islam functions as a rational ethic rather than a political

programme. This is the deeper reason why PAN consistently avoids formalistic Sharia rhetoric, the avoidance is not merely electoral pragmatism or a cynical concession to pluralist sensibilities, but a theologically grounded position in the Muhammadiyah spirit, one in which Islam is understood primarily as a civilizational instrument.

It is a conceptually loaded term carrying centuries of symbolical weight within Indonesia's modernist Islamic imagination, and its deployment on social media is best read as a conscious, if understated, act of ideological continuity (Ricklefs, 2012).

These research findings align with PAN's digital communication strategy, which heavily features visuals of young figures, creative designs, and content centered on digital public engagement. This indicates that PAN is not only striving to retain its traditional Muslim voter base but also to expand its political support among urban youth who are more open to moderate and nationalist politics.

From the perspective of Teun A. van Dijk's Critical Discourse Analysis, the macro-structure of PAN's digital rhetoric reveals central themes of religious nationalism and political modernization. The discourse constructed positions Islam as a source of social morality that supports national progress, rather than as an exclusive political identity. Meanwhile, the micro-structure is evident through the use of inclusive terms such as "together," "collaboration," and "for the people." This diction demonstrates PAN's efforts to build an image of the party as pluralistic and open to Indonesia's socio-political diversity.

In addition, this study also identified strategies of political personalization in PAN's digital communication. Party figures are portrayed as individuals who are close to the public, active on social media, and attuned to the needs of the younger generation. This personalization is crucial in the era of digital political communication because social media tends to be more effective at fostering a sense of closeness through individual figures than through formal party institutions.

This strategy aligns with the characteristics of digital political communication, which, according to (Medina Serrano et al., 2020) increasingly relies on emotional engagement, visual aesthetics, and personal narratives. From a social cognition perspective, PAN seeks to establish an identity as a moderate Islamic party compatible with democracy, pluralism, and modernity. This strategy is crucial because PAN must maintain its Muslim voter base while remaining relevant to the increasingly dominant urban moderate groups in the digital sphere. Consequently, PAN emphasizes issues such as social welfare, the digital economy, youth entrepreneurship, and national development over exclusive Islamic rhetoric.

A study of (Medina Serrano et al., 2020) (Ulya, 2024) found that political parties in Southeast Asia do indeed still rely on religious rhetoric, but tend to avoid overly exclusive religious rhetoric on social media because the digital space is highly sensitive to identity polarization. They strive to align it with national issues such as nationalism, welfare, and the like.

Thus, PAN's digital rhetoric can be understood not only as a political communication strategy but also as an ideological strategy to maintain a moderate political stance amid the rise of digital identity politics in Indonesia.

### AMANAH's Digital Political Rhetoric

Initially, AMANAH tended to present a conservative Islamic image. However, as noted by (Dawe et al., 2026) the party later adapted its Islamic principles to the demands of liberal democracy. In the context of digital media, unlike PAN, AMANAH constructs a digital rhetoric that is more ideological, normative, and argumentative. On various social media platforms, for example, AMANAH consistently uses terms such as Islam Rahmah, justice, reform, integrity, and multicultural democracy. The use of these terms indicates that AMANAH seeks to build an image as a progressive Islamic party that positions Islam within the framework of constitutional democracy, citizens' rights, and Malaysian political reform.

One of the posts on AMANAH's Instagram that seems to firmly voice democracy is:

Picture 3. AMANAH's support for democracy



Source: Instagram of partiamanah, AMANAH, March 18, 2023

Another example is the post about Islam Rahmah that seems to want to show the difference with PAS, where AMANAH comes from.

Picture 4. On Islam Rahmah



In other words, AMANAH's digital political rhetoric has a more ideological orientation compared to PAN's. While PAN tends to be pragmatic and mildly populist, AMANAH emphasizes moral arguments and the values of progressive Islamic reformism. This cannot be separated from Malaysia's socio-political context, which is marked by competition between progressive and conservative Islamic groups, particularly the dominance of conservative Islamic political rhetoric from the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS).

The 2015 fraction within PAS was not merely ideological but directly precipitated by the concrete issue of "hudud" (Shariah-based criminal penalties), which PAS leader Abdul Hadi Awang sought to implement in Kelantan state. This attempt catalyzed the departure of the party's progressive faction, associated with figures like Mat Sabu and former members of ABIM (Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia), who subsequently formed AMANAH. Consequently, AMANAH's digital rhetoric carries a highly specific "trace" of this rupture—it is deliberately constructed as an anti-hudud positioning, rejecting punitive Islam in favor of an Islam centered on social justice. The term "Islam Rahmah" (Islam of mercy/compassion), which features prominently in AMANAH's discourse, functions as a direct polemical response to PAS's legalistic and retributive framing of Islamic governance (Hamid, 2018). This genealogical context is important, as the party's digital messaging cannot be divorced from its foundational opposition to the juridical maximalism that defined its break from PAS. This historical specificity is necessary for understanding how AMANAH positions itself not simply as moderate but as actively contesting a particular vision of Islamic authority in the Malaysian public sphere.

On social media, AMANAH actively promotes the narrative of Islam as a religion of mercy for all creation that supports interfaith tolerance, good governance, anti-corruption, and multicultural democracy. This narrative is significant because AMANAH emerged as a response to the rise of political Islamic conservatism in Malaysia. Consequently, digital media is utilized not merely as a campaign tool but also as an ideological arena to redefine the meaning of political Islam in Malaysia.

From the perspective of van Dijk's Critical Discourse Analysis, the macro-structure of AMANAH's discourse reveals the overarching theme of progressive Islamic reformism. Islam is positioned as a moral force that supports democracy and social pluralism. Meanwhile, the micro-structure is evident through the use of terms such as justice, harmony, reform, and democracy. The use of this vocabulary reveals the construction of a moderate Islamic identity based on universal and inclusive values.

Thus, in terms of textual structure, AMANAH's digital political rhetoric demonstrates a strong use of moral and ethical language. Their rhetoric is argumentative and grounded in normative values such as social justice, political integrity, anti-extremism, and constitutional democracy. And in terms of social cognition, AMANAH constructs an identity as an alternative to conservative Islamic politics. This strategy is evident in the consistent use of narratives of moderation, reform, and anti-extremism in digital media. In the context of Malaysia's multi-ethnic society, this rhetoric aims to demonstrate that Islam can coexist with cultural pluralism and modern democracy.

### A Comparison of the Digital Political Rhetoric of PAN and AMANAH

Based on a political rhetoric analysis of the narratives disseminated by PAN and the AMANAH Party on their various social media platforms, it was found that PAN and AMANAH share a common focus on promoting moderate Islam and digital democracy, but the two parties have different rhetorical orientations in line with the socio-political contexts of their respective countries.

In general, it can be asserted that PAN is more pragmatic in developing digital political communication for its audiences. The party's rhetoric tends to be flexible and populist in order to reach a broader voter base. In contrast, AMANAH is more consistent in using ideological rhetoric rooted in progressive Islamic reformism.

This difference appears to be influenced by the political context of each country. In Indonesia, the multiparty system and the pluralistic nature of the electorate encourage PAN to use more moderate and flexible rhetoric. Meanwhile, in Malaysia, the

competition between progressive and conservative Islam necessitates that AMANAH articulate its ideological stance more explicitly.

### **Digital Media as a Platform for Ideological Production**

The findings of this study indicate that digital media no longer functions merely as a means of political communication but has become an arena for the production and reproduction of ideology. From the perspective of Teun A. van Dijk's Critical Discourse Analysis, the language used by political parties on social media reflects power relations, legitimation strategies, and efforts to shape public understanding of sociopolitical reality. Therefore, the digital content produced by PAN and AMANAH aims not only to convey information but also to build the parties' political identities and ideologies in the digital public sphere.

At the macro-structural level, both parties consistently highlight themes of religious moderation, tolerance, democracy, unity, and public welfare. These themes indicate an ideological effort to associate the parties with Islamic values that are inclusive and compatible with the democratic system. Within van Dijk's framework, the selection of specific topics is part of a discourse strategy aimed at influencing how the public understands the parties' political positions and identities.

At the microstructural level, PAN and AMANAH repeatedly use terms such as moderation, justice, unity, harmony, and inclusivity in various digital content. The use of this vocabulary reflects a strategy of positive self-presentation—that is, an effort to portray one's own group in a positive light to the public. At the same time, both parties also differentiate themselves from groups associated with extremism, intolerance, or exclusionary identity politics, although they do so indirectly and more implicitly.

This analysis also shows that social media reinforces the process of spreading and reproducing ideology due to its visual, interactive, and algorithm-based characteristics. From van Dijk's perspective, digital media plays a role in shaping social cognition through user interactions, such as comments, content sharing, and public responses to political messages. As a result, party ideologies are not only conveyed to the audience but are also collectively reproduced and negotiated in the digital space.

Thus, PAN and AMANAH utilize digital media to shape an image of moderate Islam, build democratic legitimacy, attract the younger generation of Muslims, and respond to narratives of religious extremism emerging in the public sphere. These findings indicate that moderate Islamic parties in Southeast Asia are adapting to the changing landscape of digital political

communication, where social media has become a strategic arena in the contest over meaning, identity, and political influence in contemporary society.

### **Identity Politics and the Challenges of Digital Moderation**

Although PAN and AMANAH promote moderate, inclusive, and democratic Islamic values, this study finds that both face increasingly complex challenges due to the rise of identity politics in the digital sphere. The development of social media has transformed political communication patterns from an institutional and structured model into one that is fast-paced, emotional, personal, and heavily influenced by the logic of digital platform algorithms. In this context, political messages with a moderate tone often struggle to gain public attention compared to narratives that are provocative, antagonistic, and emotionally charged.

Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and X operate through algorithms that tend to prioritize content with high levels of interaction, such as comments, anger, conflict, and debate. Consequently, the digital space often becomes an arena that reinforces political polarization and religious identity. As emphasized by (Chan & Yi, 2024), digital media algorithms have a tendency to amplify political polarization and reinforce religious populism through the dissemination of sensational and emotional content. This situation leads to hardline, exclusive, and confrontational religious narratives going viral more easily than messages of moderation that emphasize dialogue, tolerance, and rationality.

In the context of Islamic politics in Southeast Asia, this phenomenon poses a serious challenge for moderate Islamic parties. Both PAN in Indonesia and AMANAH in Malaysia find themselves in a position where they must continually negotiate their political identities amid intensifying competition over Islamic discourse in the digital sphere. On the one hand, both parties wish to maintain their image as democratic, open Islamic political forces that are compatible with pluralism. On the other hand, they also face electoral political pressure from groups that use religious identity sentiments more aggressively to gain public support.

The discursive challenges facing moderate Islamic parties in Indonesia extend well beyond the algorithmic logic of social media polarization that dominates much of the existing literature. In the Indonesian digital political landscape, moderate parties must navigate a far more adversarial environment, one characterized by the systematic deployment of fake accounts and paid political influencers known as buzzers, whose function is to amplify religious-nationalist narratives and crowd out more nuanced, centrist voices in the digital public sphere. They may be supported by some of the external proponents of

Indonesia radicalization as well as by numerous local grassroots organizations of street and virtual imams and ustadz which are more involved into local politics. This phenomenon reached particular intensity during the 2024 presidential election cycle, when the weaponization of religious sentiment online achieved a scale and sophistication arguably without precedent in Indonesian democratic history.

Joining Prabowo Subianto's 2024 presidential coalition prompted PAN to transform from an opposition voice into a defender of government continuity. This forced PAN to reconcile its historically reformist, Islamic-moderate roots with Prabowo's nationalist-conservative platform, requiring them to frame their messaging around digital-forward, youth-friendly branding. As a party rooted in modernist Islamic values, PAN faced the challenge of justifying its coalition with a secular, ex-military elite representative as Prabowo. Critics accused the party of abandoning Islamic causes and selling out for political patronage to secure cabinet seats. This sentiment was exacerbated by the fact that prominent conservative groups originally supported rival candidate Anies Baswedan, famous for his more fundamentalist views, leaving parties like PAN vulnerable to accusations of political opportunism. While Amien Rais left PAN in 2020, his increasingly oppositional stance and creation of the Ummah party signal that conservative modernists of the older generation may be skeptical of such transformations in the party's media strategy.

This situation demonstrates that the digital space is not merely a medium for political communication but has also become an arena for the contest over religious authority and political legitimacy. On social media, various political groups are vying to define who is considered the most representative in advocating for the interests of the Muslim community. Identity narratives are often constructed through the dichotomy of us and them, that is, between groups perceived as religious and those portrayed as less Islamic or even anti-Islamic. Such strategies are effective in fostering emotional solidarity among supporters, yet simultaneously risk reinforcing social fragmentation and political intolerance.

In response to this situation, PAN and AMANAH have sought to develop digital communication strategies that are better adapted to the nature of contemporary social media. Both parties have begun utilizing visual approaches, storytelling, short videos, political memes, and the use of influencers and young figures to reach the digital generation. This approach aims to present the message of Islamic moderation in a more engaging, lighthearted, and accessible manner to young audiences without compromising its ideological substance. Thus, moderation is no longer conveyed solely through formal speeches or

statements by party elites, but also through creative content capable of competing within the social media algorithmic ecosystem.

Additionally, both parties are working to build a more humanistic image of Islam that is closely aligned with everyday societal issues, such as social justice, anti-corruption, education, the environment, and the well-being of the younger generation. This strategy is crucial because Muslim youth in the digital age tend to be more interested in practical issues and universal values than in rigid ideological rhetoric. Consequently, Islamic moderation is positioned not merely as a theological concept but also as a political approach relevant to the needs of a modern and democratic society.

Nevertheless, these efforts still face significant challenges. The fast-paced dynamics of social media often push political actors to produce messages that are simplistic, emotional, and easily shareable. In a highly competitive digital landscape, moderate parties face a dilemma between maintaining the quality of public discourse and following the logic of digital populism to gain broader public attention. This situation highlights a complex negotiation between religious identity, digital democracy, and populist political demands in the social media era.

In other words, moderate Islamic parties in Southeast Asia are not only competing in the formal electoral arena but are also engaged in a battle over the meaning of moderate Islam in the digital space. Contemporary political battles no longer take place solely through conventional campaigns or parliamentary debates, but also through algorithms, trending topics, virality, and narrative production on social media. Therefore, the success of PAN and AMANAH in maintaining their political influence depends heavily on their ability to adapt Islamic moderation into a digital communication language that is more participatory, emotional, and relevant to the media culture of today's generation.

#### 4. Conclusion

This study shows that the development of digital media has brought about significant changes in the patterns of political communication among moderate Islamic parties in Southeast Asia. In this context, PAN in Indonesia and AMANAH in Malaysia utilize digital media not only as a tool for political campaigning but also as a strategic arena for building ideology, shaping political image, and negotiating Islamic identity within the digital public sphere. The presence of social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter/X, Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube has enabled both parties to establish political communication that is faster, more interactive, visual, and emotional compared to conventional political communication patterns.

This study reveals that the digital political rhetoric of PAN and AMANAH represents the efforts of moderate Islamic parties to maintain political relevance amidst the shifting landscape of Southeast Asia's digital democracy. Both parties recognize that the digital space has become the primary battleground for shaping public opinion, producing political identities, and competing for social legitimacy. Therefore, digital rhetorical strategies are a crucial part of their efforts to maintain political relevance while reaching a new generation of voters who are more active on social media.

The study found that PAN constructs a rhetoric of religious nationalism that is pragmatic and mildly populist. PAN tends to use political language that is simple, inclusive, and optimistic, with an emphasis on issues of public welfare, social collaboration, youth empowerment, and national development. PAN's digital communication strategy shows a tendency to reduce the use of overly formal or exclusive Islamic rhetoric, replacing it with symbols of religious nationalism that are more moderate and easily accepted by Indonesia's pluralistic society. Through this approach, PAN seeks to maintain a modernist Islamic identity while demonstrating compatibility with democracy, pluralism, and Indonesia's political modernity.

Meanwhile, AMANAH in Malaysia has developed a more ideological and reformist digital political rhetoric. The party promotes a narrative of progressive Islam through the use of terms such as Islam Rahmah, justice, etc. AMANAH's digital rhetoric demonstrates an effort to build an image of Islam that is inclusive, tolerant, and democratic as an alternative to conservative Islamic politics in Malaysia. Unlike the more pragmatic PAN, AMANAH tends to maintain a political discourse that is more argumentative and grounded in normative values. In the context of Malaysia's multi-ethnic and multi-religious society, this communication strategy is crucial for strengthening AMANAH's political legitimacy as a representative of progressive and moderate Islam.

From the perspective of Teun A. van Dijk's Critical Discourse Analysis, the digital rhetoric of both parties reveals a close relationship between language, power, and political ideology. The political language used by PAN and AMANAH is not neutral but rather represents specific ideological interests. PAN employs inclusive and nationalist language to establish its legitimacy as a moderate Islamic party compatible with Indonesian pluralism. Meanwhile, AMANAH employs moral and reformist rhetoric to assert its position as a progressive Islamic force in Malaysian politics. Thus, digital media serves as a space for the production of socio-political meaning where Islamic identity, democracy, and power are continuously negotiated.

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