

# SYMBOLS, CHARISMA, AND RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY: POLITICAL COMMUNICATION STRATEGY OF ULAMA IN REGIONAL ELECTIONS

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Received : 20 November 2025

Published : 17 January 2026

Revised : 01 December 2025

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.54443/morfai.v6i2.4919>

Accepted : 25 December 2025

Publish Link : <https://radjapublika.com/index.php/MORFAI/article/view/4919>

## Abstract

Moral support and political communication at the local level have a significant impact on the victory of regional head candidates in Tapal Kuda. This study aims to analyze the role of religious scholars in local political communication, the strategies used, and their impact on the results of the regional head elections. This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study method in two regions with strong religious cultures: Probolinggo, Bondowoso, Jember, and Situbondo Regencies. The results found Moral Endorsement, where religious scholars provide explicit support to certain candidates, often by linking the candidate's character to religious values. The dissemination of political messages through religious sermons, mass mobilization, religious scholars mobilizing their support base to attend campaigns and using religious networks to strengthen political support.

**Keywords:** *political communication, politicization of religion, clerics and moral legitimacy, local political dynamics, regional heads*

## INTRODUCTION

Local political communication plays a crucial role in regional head elections, particularly in regions where culture and religion significantly influence people's political preferences. Respected religious figures, ulama (Islamic scholars), are often crucial actors in this political communication process. They not only provide moral guidance to the community but also serve as a bridge between candidates and voters. This article aims to analyze the role of ulama in local political communication, the strategies they employ, and their impact on regional head election outcomes. Studies on political communication highlight the importance of local actors, such as religious figures, in shaping public opinion (HS et al., 2021; Pribadi, 2018, 2018). In local contexts, ulama are often perceived as possessing strong moral legitimacy, allowing their opinions and support to influence public choice (Chalik, 2016; Hasan, 2015). According to (Azizah, 2021; Kontselasi & Lokal, n.d.; Thohir et al., 2021), the role of religious scholars in politics often includes endorsing specific candidates, disseminating political messages through sermons, and mobilizing religiously-based masses. However, the relationship between religion and politics also poses challenges, including the risk of politicization of religion and the emergence of conflicts of interest. This study attempts to bridge this gap in the literature by focusing on the local dynamics of regional head elections. The research questions are (1) What is the role of religious scholars in local political communication? (2) What strategies are used to win the candidates they nominate? (3) What impact does this have on the results of regional head elections?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Political Communication

Political communication is the process of exchanging messages carried out by political actors with the aim of influencing public opinion and political behavior. According to (El Adawiyah et al., 2019; Fahmi, 2020; Siswati, 2018), political communication includes the use of symbols, media, and social interactions to achieve specific political goals. In local contexts, the role of non-governmental actors, such as religious and community leaders, is crucial in shaping public political opinion. Ulama, as religious figures, possess moral legitimacy that allows them to act as liaisons between candidates and the public. A study (Yudiantiasa, 2020) shows that ulama often use their positions to provide moral endorsements to certain candidates, who are perceived as representing religious values. This endorsement not only builds the candidate's image but also increases public trust in the political process.

Furthermore, research (Arrobi & Nadzifah, 2020; HS et al., 2021; Nurul Aula, 2020) found that clerics frequently use religious sermons as a medium to convey political messages. These messages are typically embedded within the context of religious values, making them more easily accepted by the audience. This strategy is particularly effective in areas with high levels of religiosity. However, there are challenges to religion-based political communication. According to (Arrobi & Nadzifah, 2020; Azizah, 2020; Thohir et al., 2021), the politicization of religion can lead to social fragmentation and intergroup conflict. In some cases, the involvement of clerics in politics has also drawn criticism regarding their independence as religious figures. Thus, the literature shows that religion-based political communication has great potential in shaping public opinion, but also requires a careful approach to avoid negative impacts.

### **Scholars and Moral Legitimacy**

Ulama is a term referring to Islamic scholars or religious figures who possess in-depth knowledge of religious teachings, Sharia law, and Islamic traditions. They are considered guardians of religious authority and sources of moral guidance for Muslims. According to (HS et al., 2021; Menchik, 2019; Turmudi, 2006), ulama hold a strategic position in society due to their ability to convey religious teachings in a form relevant to everyday life. Moral legitimacy refers to societal recognition and acceptance of a person's authority based on their integrity, ethics, and moral values. In the context of religious scholars, moral legitimacy is achieved through consistency in practicing religious teachings, commitment to the interests of the community, and involvement in social issues. This legitimacy allows religious scholars to influence societal views and decisions, including in political contexts. Studies (Husyein, 2015) show that moral legitimacy plays a crucial role in building public trust in the messages conveyed by religious figures. Scholars with moral legitimacy are not only respected as spiritual leaders but also trusted as advisors in various aspects of life, including politics. This makes them powerful actors in political communication, particularly in communities that highly value religious values.

### **Politicization of Religion**

The politicization of religion refers to the process by which religious values, symbols, or institutions are used for political purposes. In the context of political communication, the politicization of religion is often used as a strategy to attract support from religious voter groups. According to (Burhani, 2021), the politicization of religion can occur when political actors exploit religious identity to create solidarity or differentiate themselves from their political opponents. However, the politicization of religion has complex impacts. On the one hand, it can increase political participation among religious groups. On the other hand, it also risks dividing society, especially when religion is used to reinforce sectarian sentiments or group exclusivity. Studies (Natar, 2019; Nurul Aula, 2020; Zamroni, 2018) show that the politicization of religion often causes social tension, especially in religiously heterogeneous societies. In the context of regional head elections, the politicization of religion is evident in campaigns that use religious narratives to attack or support certain candidates. This phenomenon demonstrates the need for a cautious approach in managing the relationship between religion and politics to avoid protracted conflict. Thus, the politicization of religion is a double-edged sword in political communication. While it can be a powerful tool for mass mobilization, its unwise use can undermine social cohesion and threaten political stability.

### **Local Political Dynamics in Regional Head Elections**

The dynamics of local politics in regional head elections encompass interactions between various political actors, including candidates, political parties, community leaders, and voters. In the local context, factors such as culture, religion, and social networks play a significant role in shaping people's political behavior. According to (Akbar, 2017; Astuti et al., 2019; Azizah & Armoyu, 2019), regional head elections often become an arena of intense competition due to their direct impact on the distribution of local resources and public policy. The main factors that influence local political dynamics include: (1) Social Structure: Local communities are often divided by religious identity, ethnicity, or political affiliation, which influences patterns of support for certain candidates. (2) Power of Local Figures: Community figures, including religious scholars, have a large influence in determining the political preferences of the community. Endorsements from local figures can increase the legitimacy of candidates. (3) Local Issues: Voters tend to be more responsive to issues that directly affect their lives, such as access to public services, infrastructure development, and economic well-being. Campaign Strategy: Candidates employ a variety of strategies to reach voters, including personal outreach, social media use, and mobilization of religious or ethnic communities. Studies (Astuti et al., 2019; Azahra & Alfirdaus, 2019) highlight that candidates' success in regional head elections often depends on their ability to build broad coalitions and navigate complex local dynamics. However, these

dynamics are also vulnerable to vote-buying, identity manipulation, and conflicts of interest that can undermine the integrity of the electoral process. Local political dynamics demonstrate the importance of understanding the social and cultural context in designing effective and inclusive political strategies. In this context, the role of religious scholars and other local figures is crucial in ensuring that the political process is fair and democratic.

## METHOD

This research employed a qualitative approach with a case study method in two regions with strong religious cultures: Probolinggo, Bondowoso, Jember, and Situbondo Regencies. Data were collected through descriptive analyses of religious scholars, regional head candidates, and voters, as well as analysis of documents related to political campaigns. Direct observation during the campaign period was also conducted to observe interactions between religious scholars and the community. Data analysis employed triangulation to ensure the validity of the findings.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research results show that ulama play a strategic role in local political communication through three main approaches:

### Moral Endorsement :

Clerics explicitly support specific candidates, often linking their character to religious values . This support influences voters who believe in the clerics' moral authority.

*Table 1: Endorsement of Ulama to Regent candidates in Tapal Kuda :*

| N<br>o | Regency     | Candidate<br>Name  | Supporting Scholars  | The bearer     | Inform<br>ation |
|--------|-------------|--|--|----------------|-----------------|
| 1      | Probolinggo | Mohammad<br>Haris<br>Damanhuri<br>Romly (Regent)<br>and Fahmi<br>(Deputy Regent) | 1. KH. Moh. Hasan Mutawakkil<br>'Alallah, SH, MM, who is the<br>caretaker of the Zainul Hasan<br>Genggong Islamic Boarding<br>School.<br>2. KH. Muhammad Zuhri Zaini:<br>Caretaker of the Nurul Jadid<br>Paiton Probolinggo Islamic<br>Boarding School | Gerindra       | Win             |
| 2      | Bondowoso   | RKH Abdul<br>Hamid Wahid,<br>S.Ag., M.Ag.  | 1. KH. Muhammad Zuhri Zaini:<br>Caretaker of the Nurul Jadid<br>Paiton Probolinggo Islamic<br>Boarding School<br>2. KHR Cholil As'ad: Caretaker of<br>the Wali Songo Islamic Boarding<br>School in Situbondo   | PKB            | Win             |
| 3      | Jember      | H. Muhammad<br>Fawait, SE,<br>M.Sc   | 1. KH. Mukhiddin Abdus Somad<br>2. KH. Muzakki Syah, Caretaker of<br>the Al Qodiri Islamic Boarding<br>School in Jember<br>3. Caretaker of Nurul Chotib Al-<br>Qodiri IV Islamic Boarding<br>School, Wringinagung Village,<br>Jombang District, Jember | Gerindra       | Win             |
| 4      | Situbondo   | Yusuf Rio<br>Wahyu Prayogo   | 1. KHR. Cholil Asad: Caretaker of<br>the Wali Songo Islamic Boarding<br>School in Situbondo  | PKB, PPP, etc. | Win             |

Source: Data processed by researchers, 2024

The elected Regent in the 2024 Simultaneous Regional Election on November 27, 2024 in Probolinggo Regency is Mohammad Haris Damanhuri Romly or commonly called Gus Haris. Born on September 27, 1974, he is a Businessman and Politician from the Gerindra Party from the Zainul Hasan Genggong Islamic Boarding School, Pajarakan District, Probolinggo Regency, East Java. Haris is the first son of the late KH Damanhuri Romly Tamim and Ning Sus or bu Nyai. Hj. Diana Susilowati or Ning Sus. He is also the nephew of KH Moh. Hasan Mutawakkil 'Alallah, SH, MM who is the Caretaker of the Zainul Hasan Genggong Islamic Boarding School. Probolinggo. side by side with the elected Deputy Regent Fahmi Abdul Haq Zaini or better known as Lora Fahmi AHZ (born November 17, 1985) is a politician and cleric who comes from the Nurul Jadid Islamic Boarding School, Paiton District, Probolinggo Regency, East Java.

RKH Abdul Hamid Wahid, S.Ag., M.Ag. or better known as Lora Hamid. (born September 4, 1971) was born to KH Abd. Wahid Zaini, SH (Alm.) and Mrs. Hj. Zubaidiyah Thoha. from the Nurul Jadid Islamic Boarding School family, Karanganyar, Paiton, Probolinggo, East Java. Since childhood he has received formal religious education, until then continued his career as a teacher still in the field of religion. He is a member of the Indonesian House of Representatives for the 2004-2009 and 2009-2014 periods from the National Awakening Party representing East Java. He was placed in Commission X which handles Education, Sports, Tourism, Arts and Culture. Currently he serves as Head of the Nurul Jadid Islamic Boarding School and Chancellor of Nurul Jadid University Paiton Probolinggo East Java Indonesia.

H. Muhammad Fawait, SE, M.Sc. (born February 8, 1988) is the Regent of Jember. The son of Chodori Chotib and Masluhah Mansur Chodori, who is the caretaker of the Tegalrejo Islamic Boarding School in Magelang Regency. Fawait, paired with the elected Deputy Regent Djoko Susanto, managed to defeat the incumbent. Gus Fawait, also the caretaker of the Nurul Chotib Al-Qodiri IV Islamic Boarding School in Wringinagung Village, Jombang District, Jember, won with 54.30 percent of the vote. Meanwhile, the incumbent candidate pair only got 45.70 percent of the total voters. The elected Regent of Situbondo Regency, Yusuf Rio Wahyu Prayogo, S.Sos. Place, Date of Birth Situbondo, March 30, 1984. Address Situbondo, East Java. Last education Bachelor's degree. Rio was nominated by the National Awakening Party, the United Development Party, Golkar, PDIP,

### **Spread of Political Messages :**

Through religious sermons, clerics insert political messages supporting specific candidates. This strategy is effective in reaching communities active in religious activities.



The pair Gus Haris and Gus Fahmi are fully supported by two large Islamic boarding schools in Genggong, KH. Mutawakkil Islamic Boarding School, its caretaker, and Nurul Jadid Islamic Boarding School in Paiton.

### **Mass Mobilization :**

Clerics mobilize their support base to attend campaigns and use religious networks to strengthen political support.





KHR, Cholil Asad Supports the Elected Regent Candidate of Situbondo Regency: Yusuf Rio Wahyu Prayogo, S.Sos



Image of the RAHMAD Pair, the elected candidate pair from Bondowoso, received full support from several religious figures from Situbondo, KHR Azaim Ibrahimy, KH, Malik Sanusi from Bondowoso, KH Zuhri, caretaker of the Nurul Jadid Paton Probolinggo Islamic Boarding School. However, research also identified challenges, such as the emergence of criticism of clerics as being too partisan and the risk of social fragmentation due to the politicization of religion. In some cases, the involvement of clerics has actually sparked resistance from community groups who disagree with their political views.

## CONCLUSION

Ulama (Islamic scholars) play a significant role in local political communication, particularly in the context of regional head elections. Their strategies, which include moral endorsement, dissemination of political messages, and mass mobilization, have proven effective in influencing voter preferences. However, it is crucial to maintain a balance between the role of ulama as religious figures and their involvement in politics to avoid social conflict. This study recommends clear regulations regarding the role of religious figures in politics, as well as political education for the public, to encourage more rational and pressure-free elections.

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