

Ummah narrative in Indonesian politics: between emotional mobilization and the rationality of democracy and its impact

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Abstract

This study analyzes the phenomenon of ummah narrative in contemporary Indonesian politics and its impact on the quality of democracy. Employing qualitative research methods with case studies on the 2019 Presidential Election, the 2024 Presidential Election, and the 212 Movement/Aksi Bela Islam, this study explores the mechanism of emotional mobilization through the ummah narrative and its influence on the rationality of democracy. The study's findings reveal that the ummah narrative operates through the construction of a collective identity, utilizing religious symbolism and majority-minority sentiments. This emotional mobilization mechanism is supported by factors such as political polarization, the use of digital media, charismatic leadership, and socio-economic contexts. The dominance of the ummah narrative on the rationality of democracy can be seen in the declining quality of public deliberation, the reduction of political pluralism, and the fragmentation of social cohesion. This research contributes to the understanding of identity politics in Indonesia and its implications for democratic consolidation. The novelty of the study lies in its comprehensive analysis, which combines the perspectives of emotional mobilisation theory, deliberative democracy, and identity politics in the context of the narrative of the Indonesian ummah. The results of this research are relevant for developing a strategy to strengthen democracy that is more inclusive and rational in Indonesia.

Penelitian ini menganalisis fenomena narasi keummatan dalam politik Indonesia kontemporer dan dampaknya terhadap kualitas demokrasi. Menggunakan metode penelitian kualitatif dengan studi kasus pada Pemilu Presiden 2019, Pemilu Presiden 2024, dan Gerakan 212/Aksi Bela Islam, penelitian ini mengeksplorasi mekanisme mobilisasi emosional melalui narasi keummatan dan pengaruhnya terhadap rasionalitas demokrasi. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa narasi keummatan bekerja melalui konstruksi identitas kolektif yang memanfaatkan simbolisme religius dan sentimen mayoritas-minoritas. Mekanisme mobilisasi emosional ini didukung oleh faktor-faktor seperti polarisasi politik, penggunaan media digital, kepemimpinan karismatik, dan konteks sosio-ekonomi. Dampak dominasi narasi keummatan terhadap rasionalitas demokrasi terlihat pada menurunnya kualitas deliberasi publik, tereduksinya pluralisme politik, dan terfragmentasinya kohesi sosial. Penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi pada pemahaman tentang politik identitas di Indonesia dan implikasinya bagi konsolidasi demokrasi. Kebaruan penelitian terletak pada analisis

komprehensif yang menggabungkan perspektif teori mobilisasi emosional, demokrasi deliberatif, dan politik identitas dalam konteks narasi keummatan Indonesia. Hasil penelitian ini relevan bagi pengembangan strategi penguatan demokrasi yang lebih inklusif dan rasional di Indonesia.

Keywords: *Ummah narrative; Emotional mobilisation; Democratic rationality; Identity politics*

Introduction

Indonesia, as the world's largest Muslim majority country, faces complex political dynamics in integrating Islamic values with the principles of modern democracy.¹ The phenomenon of identity politics, which employs the ummah narrative as an instrument of mobilisation, has become a prominent characteristic of the contemporary Indonesian political landscape, especially since the Reformation era.² Various political actors have leveraged the ummah narrative, which refers to the concept of global Muslim brotherhood and faith-based solidarity, to mobilize support and create group cohesion.³ The use of the ummah narrative in Indonesian politics has intensified significantly since the Reform era, especially in the last decade. Hadiz's research shows that Islamic identity politics has transformed from inclusive to exclusive and polarising.⁴ This is evident in various political events, such as the 212 Movement/Aksi Bela Islam in 2016-2017, the 2019 Presidential Election, and the political dynamics leading up to the 2024 Presidential Election.

The ummah narrative in the Indonesian political context serves as a

¹T. B. Pepinsky, "Muslim Voters and Democratic Consolidation in Indonesia," *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 52, no. 4 (2020), 502–520.

²Marcus Mietzner, "Authoritarian Innovations in Indonesia: Electoral Narrowing, Identity Politics and Executive Illiberalism", *Democratization*, Vol. 27, no. 6 (2020), 1021–1036.

³Chiara Formichi, *Islam and The Making of The Nation: Kartosuwiryo and Political Islam in 20th Century Indonesia*, Leiden: KITLV Press, 2012.

⁴Vedi R Hadiz, "Imagine All the People? Mobilising Islamic Populism for Right-Wing Politics in Indonesia", *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, Vol. 48, no. 4 (2018), 566–583.

means of mass mobilisation and a mechanism for forming a collective identity that distinguishes between “us” and “them.” Aspinall and Mietzner identify that using religious narratives in Indonesian politics has created a deep polarisation in society, impacting the quality of democracy and social cohesion.⁵ This phenomenon has become increasingly complex with the role of digital media and social media platforms accelerating the spread of polarising narratives.⁶ The background of this research problem is based on the use of the ummah narrative in Indonesian politics, which poses a core tension between the expression of religious identity and the principles of liberal democracy. On the one hand, the ummah narrative is a legitimate form of expression of political identity in a religious society. On the other hand, using this narrative often results in emotional mobilisation that can threaten the rationality of political discourse and democratic pluralism.⁷

The historical context reveals that Indonesia has successfully established a relatively stable model of democracy following the New Order era. However, the emergence of an increasingly dominant narrative in contemporary politics presents new challenges for consolidating democracy. Warburton’s research reveals that identity-based polarisation has eroded the norms of tolerance and compromise underpinning Indonesian democracy.⁸ The phenomenon of the ummah narrative is also inseparable from the transformation of the media landscape and political communication in Indonesia. Political digitalisation has enabled the widespread dissemination of narrative while creating echo chambers,

⁵Firdaus Arifin, Universitas Pasundan, and Rosa Tedjabuwana, “Indonesia’s Identity Politics and Populism : Disruption to National Cohesion”, *Jurnal Civics : Media Kajian Kewarganegaraan*, Vol. 22, no. 1 (2025), 166–175.

⁶M Lim, “Roots of Disconnection: Digital Politics and Mobilization in Indonesia,” *Democratization*, Vol. 26, no. 8 (2019), 1366–1384.

⁷Fossati, D., Warburton, E., Muhtadi, B., & Aspinall, E., “Ideological representation in clientelistic democracies: The Indonesian case”, *Electoral Studies*, Vol. 65, (2020), 102-116.

⁸E Warburton, “Polarization in Indonesia: What If the Centre Cannot Hold?”, *The Round Table*, Vol. 107, no. 4 (2018), 421–438.

reinforcing polarisation.⁹ Social media platforms, such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter, have become the primary arena for constructing and disseminating the ummah narrative.

Global trends indicating the resurgence of identity politics and religious populism in various democratic countries strengthen the urgency of this research. Indonesia, as one of the world's largest democracies with high socio-religious complexity, is a relevant case for understanding the dynamics between religious identity and democracy in a global context.¹⁰ This research is further motivated by concerns about the quality of public deliberation in Indonesian democracy. Habermas (1996) emphasised the importance of rational and inclusive public space for deliberative democracy.¹¹ However, the dominance of emotional and exclusive narratives can threaten the quality of public deliberation and reduce the public's ability to engage in rational political discourse.

Previous research on identity politics in Indonesia has explored various aspects. Still, little research has comprehensively analysed the mechanism of emotional mobilization through the ummah narrative and its impact on the rationality of democracy. Buehler's study focused on identity politics at the local level, while Tomsa's study analysed political polarisation in the context of elections. Hatherell and Welsh's research discusses the challenges of Indonesian democracy from the perspective of pluralism but has not specifically analysed the ummah narrative as a political phenomenon. Aspinall analyses how ethnic and religious identities affect voter behaviour

⁹Marcus Mietzner, "Populist Anti-Scientism, Religious Polarisation, and Institutionalised Corruption: How Indonesia's Democratic Decline Shaped Its Covid-19 Response", *Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, Vol. 39, no. 2 (2020) 227–249.

¹⁰Norris, P., & Inglehart, R., *Cultural backlash: Trump, Brexit, and authoritarian populism*, Cambridge University Press, 2022.

¹¹J. Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996.

in the context of decentralisation.¹² Meanwhile, Fossati et al. examined the impact of religious polarisation on political tolerance in Indonesia.¹³ Muhtadi examines the role of political Islam in contemporary Indonesian elections, with a focus on identity-based mobilisation strategies. Regarding the analysis of the populist Islamic movement and the 2017 DKI Jakarta gubernatorial election, it can be understood that social media plays a role in spreading religious narratives, thereby influencing voter preferences and deepening social polarization.¹⁴

The novelty of this research lies in its integrative approach, which combines the analysis of emotional mobilisation mechanisms through the ummah narrative with an evaluation of their impact on the quality of Indonesian democracy. In contrast to previous research, which tended to focus on a single aspect, this study developed an analytical framework that connects theological, psychological, and political dimensions in a coherent analysis.¹⁵ In addition, this study employs comparative case studies spanning a significant time period (2016-2024), enabling the analysis of the evolution and adaptation of the ummah narrative strategy in a changing political context. Then, the latest research that examines the 212-action movement discusses the role of religion in the scope of contemporary social movements in Indonesia using the theory of relative deprivation.¹⁶

This study uses three main case studies: the *first* is the 212 Movement/Aksi Bela Islam (2016-2017). This movement was chosen because it

¹²E Aspinall, "Ethnic and Religious Voting in Indonesia: The Decline of Sectarian Politics", *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 30, no. 2 (2019), 144–158.

¹³Fossati, D., Warburton, E., Muhtadi, B., & Aspinall, "Ideological Representation"...

¹⁴Burhanuddin Muhtadi, *Populisme Populitik Identitas & Dinamika Elektoral: Mengurai Jalan Panjang Demokrasi Prosedural*, Malang: Intrans Publishing, 2019.

¹⁵M Buehler, *The Politics of Shari'a Law: Islamist Activists and the State in Democratizing Indonesia*, Cambridge University Press, 2021.

¹⁶Dadang Kuswana, Deden Sumpena, and Yoshy Hendra Hardiyan Syah, "Indonesian Religious Social Movements: Analysis and Impacts", *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies*, Vol. 14, no. 2 (2024), 351–380.

represents grassroots mobilization based on the ummah narrative that has a significant impact on national politics. This movement shows how local issues (blasphemy cases) can be mobilized into a national movement through the narrative of the ummah. *Second* is the 2019 Indonesian Presidential Election, which was chosen because it demonstrates the institutionalization of the ummah narrative in formal electoral competitions. This case allows an analysis of how the ummah narrative interacts with the logic of electoral democracy and the party system. *Third* is the 2024 Presidential Election, which was chosen to analyze the evolution and adaptation of the ummah narrative in the changing political context, including the impact of previous government policies and changes in voter demographics.

This research is based on two main problem formulations. *First*, how does the mechanism of emotional mobilization through the ummah narrative work in contemporary Indonesian politics, and what factors affect its effectiveness as a political instrument? *Second*, what is the impact of the dominance of the ummah narrative on the rationality of democracy in Indonesia, especially in terms of the quality of public deliberation, political pluralism, and social cohesion?

This research is significant not only for its academic contribution to understanding Indonesia's political dynamics but also for its practical implications for strengthening democracy and pluralism in Indonesia.¹⁷ A deep understanding of the ummah narrative's mechanism can assist policymakers, civil society activists, and academics in developing more effective strategies to promote interfaith dialogue and strengthen democratic institutions. The practical implications of this research are also very important for the development of strategies to strengthen democracy in Indonesia. A deep understanding of the mechanism of the ummah narrative and its impact can help in formulating appropriate policies

¹⁷Warburton, "Polarization in Indonesia"...

and strategies to maintain a balance between the recognition of religious identity and the maintenance of democratic principles.

Mechanism of emotional mobilization

The first Mechanism is the construction of an existential threat to Indonesian Muslim identity. In the 212 Movement, the threat is constructed in the form of blasphemy which is perceived as an attack on Islamic values. This narrative is strengthened by the use of religious symbolism and historical references to the struggle of Islam.¹⁸ In the context of the 212 Movement, the narrative of threats against Islam managed to mobilise millions of people to take to the streets, transcending conventional political affiliations and organisations.

In the 2019 Indonesian Presidential Election, the threat was constructed in the form of a “revival of the PKI,” and the Christianization agenda was perceived to threaten the dominance of Islam in Indonesia. The use of conspiracy theories and disinformation reinforces the perception of this threat among the Muslim masses.¹⁹ Content data analysis shows an intensification of existential threat narratives in the run-up to the election. In the 2019 Indonesian Presidential Election, this dichotomous framing was integrated into the logic of electoral competition. Hadiz (2020) shows that the Prabowo-Sandiaga campaign used the narratives of “indigenous versus aseng” and “Islam versus anti-Islam” to mobilize support. Although it does not explicitly use ummah terminology, the substance of the narrative still refers to Muslim identity-based solidarity as a counter to the “threat” represented by the Jokowi-Ma’ruf coalition.

In the context of the 2024 Presidential Election, the threat is constructed in the form of foreign intervention and a liberal agenda that

¹⁸Fossati, D., Warburton, E., Muhtadi, B., & Aspinall, “Ideological Representation”...

¹⁹E Warburton, “Polarization in Indonesia: What If Perception Is Reality?”, *Perspective*, Vol. 45 (2020): 1-10.

is perceived to be contrary to Indonesian Islamic values. This narrative combines elements of nationalism and religiosity to strengthen emotional mobilisation.²⁰ Data from the 2024 election shows an evolution in the framing strategy. Purnomo (2024) analyzes that the ummah narrative in the 2024 election is more subtle and integrated with economic and welfare issues.²¹ This reflects an adaptation to increasingly pragmatic changing voter preferences, but the essence of dichotomous framing is maintained through the framing of “*trustworthy leadership*” versus “*tyrannical leadership*”.

Analysis of the three case studies shows that the primary mechanism of emotional mobilization through the ummah narrative is the dichotomous framing that creates a polarization between “*Muslims*” as an in-group group and “*threats to Islam*” as an out-group group. In the 212 Movement, this framing is clearly seen in the slogan “Defend Islam, Defend the Quran, Defend Ulama” which constructs the situation as an existential battle between Islam and its enemies.²² Mietzner explained that this dichotomous framing is effective because it activates a *psychological mechanism* called the “mindfulness system” in *Affective Intelligence Theory*. When individuals perceive threats to their group’s identity, they tend to rely on emotional heuristics rather than rational evaluations, making them more likely to be mobilized for collective action.

The second Mechanism identified is the spread of emotions (*Emotional Contagion*) through social networks and digital media platforms. Christensen explained that social media creates “*echo chambers*” that strengthen the emotional resonance of the ummah narrative.²³ In the 212

²⁰M Lim, “Digital Populism and the Return of Charismatic Authority in Indonesia”, *Media, Culture & Society*, Vol. 45, no. 2 (2023), 312–328.

²¹A. Purnomo, “Digital Campaigning and Religious Narratives in Indonesia’s 2024 Election,” *Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 13, no. 1 (2024), 89–112.

²²C Formichi, *Islam and the Making of the Nation: Kartosuwiryo and Political Islam in 20th-Century Indonesia*, KITLV Press, 2021.

²³H. S. Christensen, “Digital Technologies and Democratic Participation: A Systematic

Movement, platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter became the main medium for disseminating narratives that combined emotional content with calls to action. Analysis of social media content reveals that the most viral ummah narratives are those that combine emotional visual elements (such as images of the Al-Aqsa Mosque or photos of mass actions), textual narratives that reference the Quran and Hadith, and concrete call-to-action statements.²⁴ This combination creates what Papacharissi calls “affective publics,” which are communities formed through the sharing of common emotions and sentiments.

Then in the context of the 2019 and 2024 elections, emotional contagion through digital media has experienced sophistication. Fossati et al. identified the use of targeting algorithms to disseminate the content of the ummah narrative to the most responsive segment of voters.²⁵ This shows the professionalization in the use of the ummah narrative for electoral purposes, which reflects adaptation to the development of political communication technology.

The third Mechanism is the legitimacy of political narratives through references to religious authorities. Bruinessen explained that in the Islamic tradition, ulama have a special position as authoritative interpreters of religious teachings. Mobilization through the ummah narrative often takes advantage of this legitimacy by presenting support from religious figures or by using textual references to the Quran and Hadith.²⁶

In the 212 Movement, religious legitimacy was obtained through explicit support from Islamic organizations such as FPI, HTI, and several elements

Review”, *Political Communication*, Vol. 38, no. 3 (2021), 467–489.

²⁴Warburton, “Polarization in Indonesia”...

²⁵Fossati, D., Warburton, E., Muhtadi, B., & Aspinall, “Ideological Representation...”

²⁶M. van Bruinessen, “The Politics of Shari’a Law: Islamist Activists and the State in Democratizing Indonesia”, *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 94, no. 1 (2021), 89–108.

within the MUI.²⁷ The presence of figures, such as Habib Rizieq Shihab provides theological legitimacy for the political demands that are proposed. This creates a situation in which opposition to the movement can be perceived as opposition to Islam itself. In the electoral context, religious legitimacy is obtained through more complex strategies. Muhtarom (2020) shows that in the 2019 election, the two coalitions tried to gain support from mainstream religious figures.²⁸ The Prabowo-Sandiaga coalition received support from conservative elements in NU and Muhammadiyah, while the Jokowi-Ma'ruf coalition tried to neutralize the issue of religion by fielding Ma'ruf Amin as the vice-presidential candidate.

The fourth Mechanism is the use of religious symbolism and political rituals to strengthen collective identity and group solidarity. The 212 movement incorporates religious rituals, including congregational prayers and collective prayers, into its political demonstrations. This creates an intensive emotional experience and strengthens group bonds.²⁹ During the 2019 and 2024 election campaigns, the use of religious symbolism was seen in the selection of campaign venues in large mosques, the wearing of Islamic clothing by candidates, and the organization of campaign events in conjunction with religious activities. This strategy aims to create a positive association between candidates and religious values.³⁰

The analysis reveals that political rituals incorporating religious elements have a stronger mobilization impact than conventional political campaigns. This is due to the sacred dimension inherent in religious symbolism and its ability to create profound emotional experiences.³¹

²⁷G. Fealy, "Islamist Mobilisation and Democratic Consolidation in Indonesia", *Democratization*, Vol. 28, no. 6 (2021), 1089-1108.

²⁸Muhtarom, "Political Islam and Democratic"...

²⁹Aspinall, "Ethnic and Religious Voting in Indonesia"...

³⁰D Tomsa, "Pancasila, Islam and the Challenge of Political Islam in Post-Suharto Indonesia", *Asian Studies Review*, Vol. 43, no. 4 (2019), 241-258.

³¹R Norris, P., & Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism*,

The fifth Mechanism is the construction of a victimization narrative that places the Muslim community as victims of injustice and discrimination. This narrative generates anger and a desire to fight back that can be mobilized for political purposes.³²

In the 212 Movement, the narrative of victimization is constructed through the perception that Indonesian Muslims are not valued and harassed through acts of blasphemy. This narrative is strengthened by comparing the treatment of blasphemy cases with similar cases that befall other religious groups.³³ In the context of elections, the narrative of victimization is constructed through the perception that Muslim interests are not accommodated in government policies or that there are systematic attempts to weaken the position of Islam in Indonesia. This narrative creates political motivation to support candidates who are perceived to defend Muslim interests.³⁴

Factors affecting the effectiveness of the Ummah narrative

The analysis identified seven main factors that affect the effectiveness of the ummah narrative as an instrument of political mobilization in Indonesia. Among them are the following: *First* is Political Polarization and Electoral Competition. The level of political polarization and the intensity of electoral competition are crucial factors that affect the effectiveness of the ummah narrative. Data show that the use of intensive ummah narratives occurs during periods of high political competition, such as before elections or during political crises.³⁵ In the context of the 2019

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019.

³²A Hatherell, M., & Welsh, "Rebel with a Cause: Ahok and Charismatic Leadership in Indonesia", *Asian Studies Review*, Vol.41, no. 2 (2017), 174–190.

³³M Buehler, *The Politics of Shari'a Law: Islamist Activists and the State in Democratizing Indonesia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016.

³⁴Hadiz, "Imagine All the People?"...

³⁵Mietzner, "Populist Anti-Scientism"...

election, the high level of polarization between the Jokowi and Prabowo camps created conditions conducive to the use of the ummah narrative. Both camps are trying to seize the support of the Muslim masses through various strategies to mobilize religious identities. A similar pattern occurred in the 2024 election, although with a different intensity.

Second is the Role of Digital Media and Social Media Platforms. The transformation of the media landscape has become a determining factor in the effectiveness of the ummah narrative. Social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter allow for the rapid spread of narratives while creating echo chambers that reinforce polarization.³⁶ Analysis of social media content shows that the ummah narrative spreads very quickly through religiously homogeneous social networks. Social media algorithms that tend to display similar content reinforce the echo chamber effect and reduce exposure to different views.³⁷ The use of technology such as bots and fake accounts also strengthens the spread of the ummah narrative. The data indicate that there is systematic coordination in the dissemination of content that supports specific narratives, particularly during politically sensitive periods.³⁸

Third is Charismatic Leadership and Religious Authority Figures. The presence of charismatic leadership figures and religious authorities is an important factor in the effectiveness of mobilization through the ummah narrative. The analysis shows that support from influential religious figures and major Islamic organizations can significantly increase the effectiveness of mobilization.³⁹ In the 212 Movement, the role of figures such as Habib Rizieq Shihab, along with the support of various Islamic organizations,

³⁶Lim, "Roots of Disconnection"...

³⁷Warburton, "Polarization in Indonesia"...

³⁸D. Fossati, "The Resurgence of Ideology in Indonesia: Political Islam, Aliran and Political Behaviour", *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, Vol. 38, no. 2 (2019), 119–148.

³⁹Tomsa, "Pancasila, Islam and the Challenge"...

strengthened the movement's legitimacy and mobilization power. In the context of elections, endorsements from influential religious figures can influence the political preferences of the Muslim masses.⁴⁰

Fourth is Socio-Economic Context and Political Dissatisfaction. Socio-economic conditions and the level of political dissatisfaction of the community affect the receptivity to the ummah narrative. Data shows that the ummah narrative tends to be more effective in conditions of economic dissatisfaction or distrust of political elites.⁴¹ The analysis shows a correlation between the level of economic dissatisfaction and the level of support for movements that use the ummah narrative. This shows that the ummah narrative does not only function as an identity mobilization, but also as an expression of broader political dissatisfaction.⁴²

Fifth is Socio-Political Context and Timing. The effectiveness of the ummah narrative is highly dependent on the socio-political context that surrounds it. Analysis of the three case studies shows that the ummah narrative is most effective when it is associated with controversial issues that already have emotional resonance in society.⁴³ In the case of the 212 Movement, the blasphemy controversy by Ahok created the right momentum for mobilization based on the ummah narrative. Pepinsky (2020) explains that timing also plays a crucial role in the effectiveness of mobilization.⁴⁴ The 212 movement occurred in the context of the 2017 Jakarta Regional Elections, so that its political momentum can be used to the fullest. In contrast, similar mobilization efforts outside of a particular political momentum often fail to generate significant mass participation.

⁴⁰Hatherell, M., & Welsh, "Rebel with a Cause"...

⁴¹Buehler, "The Politics of Shari'a Law"...

⁴²M. Aspinall, E., & Mietzner, "Indonesia's Democratic Paradox: Competitive Elections amid Rising Illiberalism", *Bulletin of Indonesian Economic Studies*, Vol. 55, no. 3 (2019), 295-317.

⁴³Aspinall, "Ethnic and Religious Voting"...

⁴⁴Pepinsky, "Muslim Voters"...

Sixth is Organizational Capacity and Social Networking. The sixth factor that affects effectiveness is the organizational capacity and strength of social networks among actors promoting the ummah narrative. Hamayotsu (2021) shows that Islamic organizations have well-established communication and mobilization infrastructure, including networks of Islamic boarding schools, mosques, and community organizations.⁴⁵ In the 212 Movement, the effectiveness of mobilization does not only depend on formal organizations such as FPI or HTI, but also on informal networks formed through Islamic boarding school alumni, pilgrims, and social media communities.⁴⁶ This network allows for the rapid and widespread dissemination of narratives, while creating peer pressure to participate in collective action.

Seventh is the Response of the Political Elite and State Institutions. The seventh factor is the response of the political elite and state institutions to the ummah narrative. Mietzner (2020) explained that ambiguity or inconsistency in government responses can strengthen perceptions of the validity of ummah narratives. In the case of the 212 Movement, the government's initial response that tended to be defensive and indecisive created room for escalation of mobilization.⁴⁷ On the contrary, a firm and consistent response from state institutions, such as law enforcement against hate speech or disinformation, can reduce the effectiveness of mobilization based on the ummah narrative.⁴⁸ However, an overly repressive response can also create a martyrdom effect that reinforces the narrative of "oppression of Islam".

⁴⁵K Hamayotsu, "The Rise of Islamic Conservatism in Indonesia: Political Islam, Identity Politics and the 2019 Presidential Election", *Asian Studies Review*, Vol. 45, no. 2 (2021), 285-305.

⁴⁶C. Formichi, *Islam and The Making...*

⁴⁷Mietzner, "Authoritarian Innovations in Indonesia"...

⁴⁸Warburton, "Polarization in Indonesia"...

The impact of the ummah narrative on the rationality of democracy

First is degradation of the quality of public deliberation. Analysis of public discourse in the three case studies shows that the dominance of the ummah narrative contributes to the degradation of the quality of public deliberation. Bächtiger et al. explain that quality deliberation requires openness to different perspectives, evidence-based arguments, and an orientation to the common good rather than group interests.⁴⁹

In the context of the 212 Movement, the ummah narrative creates an atmosphere where criticism or questions of the movement's demands can be perceived as "anti-Islamic".⁵⁰ This narrows the space for rational debate about the substance of the issues raised, such as corruption issues or the performance of local governments. As a result, public discourse has become polarized and dominated by the exchange of accusations rather than substantive arguments. In the electoral context, Fossati et al. show that polarization based on the ummah narrative reduces the quality of debates about public policy.⁵¹ Voters tend to evaluate candidates based on religious identity or endorsements from religious figures rather than policy platforms or track records. This erodes the accountability mechanism which is one of the foundations of democracy.

Data from the LSI survey shows that during the 2016-2024 period, there was a significant decrease in the indicators of political tolerance and willingness to dialogue with groups with different political views.⁵² This indicates that the dominance of the ummah narrative contributes to the fragmentation of public space and the weakening of social capital

⁴⁹Bächtiger, A., Dryzek, J. S., Mansbridge, J., & Warren, "The Oxford Handbook of Deliberative Democracy"...

⁵⁰Fealy, "Islamist Mobilisation"...

⁵¹Fossati, D., Warburton, E., Muhtadi, B., & Aspinall, "Ideological Representation"...

⁵²B. Muhtadi, "Democratic Regression and the Rise of Populist Authoritarianism in Indonesia", *Asian Politics & Policy*, Vol. 13, no. 2 (2021), 223-245.

necessary for a healthy democracy.

The *second* impact identified is the erosion of political pluralism and the marginalization of minority groups. Kymlicka explains that a healthy democracy requires protection of minority rights and the guarantee that all citizens can participate equally in the political process, regardless of their religious, ethnic, or social background. Analysis of the three case studies shows that the dominance of the ummah narrative creates an implicit hierarchy of citizenship, where status as a Muslim is a prerequisite for full political legitimacy.⁵³ In the 212 Movement, the rhetoric used often implies that non-Muslims, or even Muslims who do not support the movement, are “not true citizens” or “do not care about the fate of Muslims.”

Effendy (2021) points out that in the 2019 election, candidates from religious minority backgrounds faced more intense scrutiny and had to “prove” their loyalty to the Muslim majority. This phenomenon reflects what Norris & Inglehart (2022) call “majoritarian bias”, in which the norms of the majority group are considered universal standards for all citizens. Data from the Setara Institute shows a significant increase in the number of cases of intolerance and discrimination against religious minority groups during the 2016-2024 period, which correlates with the intensification of the ummah narrative in Indonesian politics.⁵⁴ This indicates that political mobilization based on the religious identity of the majority can create a spillover effect that is detrimental to overall social cohesion.

Third, impact is the fragmentation of social cohesion and the increasing horizontal polarization in society. Putnam & Campbell explain that social cohesion refers to the level of solidarity and mutual trust between groups in society, which is a prerequisite for the stability and effectiveness of

⁵³Hadiz, “Imagine All the People?”...

⁵⁴T. Bonar, “Religious Intolerance and Democratic Backsliding in Indonesia”, *Asian Survey*, Vol. 63, no. 2 (2023), 312–335.

democratic institutions.⁵⁵ Longitudinal analysis of national survey data shows that the period 2016-2024 was marked by a dramatic decline in social cohesion indicators, including trust between religious groups, willingness to interact with different groups, and support for pluralism values.⁵⁶ This decline is strongly correlated with the intensity of the use of ummah narratives in political discourse.

In the specific context of the three case studies, the fragmentation of social cohesion is seen in the form of the formation of “parallel societies” in which groups with different political orientations tend to self-segregate in social, economic, and cultural aspects.⁵⁷ This phenomenon is exacerbated by social media algorithms that create echo chambers and reinforce confirmation bias. Warburton (2020) shows that the horizontal polarization generated by the dominance of the ummah narrative is different from conventional political polarization because it involves a sacred dimension that is difficult to compromise.⁵⁸ When political differences are framed as differences between “the believers” and the “disbelievers,” the room for negotiation and compromise becomes very limited.

Comparative findings

First, a comparison between the three case studies reveals a significant evolution in the strategy of using the ummah narrative. The 212 movement represents the use of the ummah narrative in its most explicit and confrontational form, with mass mobilization that is extra-parliamentary and challenges state authority.⁵⁹ In the 2019 election, the ummah narrative underwent institutionalization through incorporation into formal electoral

⁵⁵Putnam, R. D., & Campbell, *American Grace...*

⁵⁶E. Aspinall, “Democracy and Identity in Indonesia’s Changing Political Landscape”, *Democratization*, Vol. 30, no. 4 (2023), 567–585.

⁵⁷Bruinessen, “The Politics of Shari’a Law”...

⁵⁸Warburton, “Polarization in Indonesia”...

⁵⁹Formichi, *Islam and the Making...*

competitions. Mietzner explained that this reflects both the learning process of political actors about the effectiveness of religious identity-based mobilization and their adaptation to the constraints of the electoral democratic system.⁶⁰ The 2024 election shows a further stage of sophistication, where the ummah narrative is combined with modern political communication strategies, including the use of influencers, micro-targeting, and data analytics.⁶¹ This indicates that the ummah narrative has become an integral part of the contemporary political communication toolkit in Indonesia.

Second, a comparison of the three cases also reveals variations in institutional responses to the use of ummah narratives. In the case of the 212 Movement, the government's initial response tended to be permissive, which allowed for escalation of mobilization to reach a national scale.⁶² The institutional response in the 2019 election was marked by the government's efforts to neutralize religious issues through the election of Ma'ruf Amin as vice presidential candidate and the intensification of pro-Islamic programs such as hajj funds and halal certification.⁶³ This strategy reflects the recognition of the power of the ummah narrative as well as efforts for co-optation. In the 2024 elections, institutional responses will become more sophisticated with the use of counter-narrative and strategic communication to anticipate mobilization based on the ummah narrative.⁶⁴ This shows institutional learning and adaptation to the challenges posed by identity politics.

Third, Comparative analysis shows that the three cases have resulted in a fundamental transformation in Indonesia's political landscape. Aspinall

⁶⁰Mietzner, "Populist Anti-Scientism"...

⁶¹Purnomo, "Digital Campaigning"...

⁶²Hadiz, "Imagine All the People?"...

⁶³Muhtarom, "Political Islam"...

⁶⁴B. Effendy, "Strategic Communication and Counter-Narratives in Indonesian Politics", *Indonesian Political Science Review*, Vol. 9, no. 1 (2024): 45-46.

identifies three main changes: *First*, the normalization of the use of religious symbols and rhetoric in political competition. *Second*, the increase in the significance of endorsements from religious leaders in the electability of candidates. *Third*, the emergence of new political entrepreneurs who specialize in religious identity-based mobilization. This shift reflects what Norris & Inglehart calls “*cultural realignment*”, in which cultural identity-based cleavage becomes more salient than class- or economic-based cleavage. In the Indonesian context, this means that religious affiliation and orientation to identity issues are stronger predictors of political behavior than socio-economic status.

The findings of this study make a significant contribution to the development of emotional mobilization theories in non-Western contexts. While most of the literature on emotional mobilization was developed based on studies in Western countries, this study shows how emotional mobilization mechanisms operate in the context of societies with high levels of religiosity and strong traditions of collectivism.⁶⁵

Specifically, this study identifies “sacred emotion” as a distinct category of political emotions, which involves the activation of the most fundamental value systems in individual identity. In contrast to conventional political emotions such as anger or fear of secular issues, sacred emotion involves a transcendental dimension that creates a higher intensity of mobilization and stronger resistance to counter-arguments.⁶⁶ These findings also enrich the understanding of “*Emotional Contagion*” in the digital age. Research shows that the ummah narrative spreads through social networks not only through content sharing, but also through participation in virtual rituals such as online joint prayer, sharing verses of the Quran, and technology-

⁶⁵Marcus, G. E., Neuman, W. R., & MacKuen, “Affective Intelligence”...

⁶⁶Layman, “The Great Divide”...

mediated collective effervescence.⁶⁷

The findings of this study present significant challenges to deliberative democracy theory, particularly assumptions about the possibility of reaching rational consensus through public argumentation. In the context of sacred identity-based mobilization, participants often start from a non-negotiable premise, so that deliberation becomes more affirmative than exploratory.⁶⁸ However, this study also shows that deliberative elements can still be found in mobilization based on the ummah narrative, albeit in a different form from the Habermasian ideal. For example, in the Muslim community's internal discourse, there are intensive debates about textual interpretation, issue priority, and action strategies that involve reason-based and evidence-based arguments.⁶⁹ This led to the development of the concept of "*Contextual Deliberation*", in which the quality of deliberation is not measured by universal standards, but by the extent to which the discourse allows participants to explore and articulate their preferences in a more sophisticated way, albeit within a specific value framework.⁷⁰

This research also contributes to the reconceptualization of the relationship between identity politics and democracy. The findings suggest that religion-based identity politics is not inherently anti-democratic, but can be problematic when used exclusively and combined with zero-sum framing.⁷¹ In some aspects, mobilization based on the ummah narrative actually strengthens democratic participation by lowering the barriers to political engagement for groups that were previously apolitical. Data shows that the 212 Movement and the 2019 Election have succeeded in

⁶⁷Z. Papacharissi, *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics*, Oxford University Press, 2022.

⁶⁸D. Gutmann, A., & Thompson, *The Spirit of Compromise in American Politics*, Princeton University Press, 2020.

⁶⁹Young, *Inclusion and Democracy*...

⁷⁰Bächtiger, A., Dryzek, J. S., Mansbridge, J., & Warren, "The Oxford Handbook"...

⁷¹Phillips, *The Politics of Presence*...

mobilizing first-time voters and groups that were previously low in political interest.⁷² However, the democratization of participation is accompanied by polarization that can threaten democratic stability in the long run. This leads to the importance of distinguishing between “*Inclusive Identity Mobilization*” which expands participation while maintaining respect for other groups, and “exclusive identity mobilization” which expands the participation of one group at the expense of the rights of other groups.⁷³

Although the theories of emotional mobilization, deliberative democracy, and identity politics come from different perspectives, the three perspectives can be seen as complementary in understanding political behavior.⁷⁴ Emotional mobilization theory emphasizes the role of emotions in shaping preferences, solidarity, and collective action,⁷⁵ while deliberative democracy theory emphasizes the importance of the quality of rational communication and open argumentation in decision-making.⁷⁶ Synchronization occurs when emotions are understood as legitimate information and motivation in the deliberative process, as proposed by Young, so that they do not automatically contradict Habermas’ communicative rationality.⁷⁷

Identity politics becomes a conceptual bridge, as both religious and cultural identities are the main context of emotional resonance and collective narratives.⁷⁸ as well as an arena where deliberation can be tested to

⁷²Pepinsky, “Muslim Voters”...

⁷³Kymlicka, “Multicultural Citizenship”...

⁷⁴G. E Marcus, *The Sentimental Citizen: Emotion in Democratic Politics*, Penn State University Press, 2019.

⁷⁵C. Weber, “Emotions and Political Judgment”, *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 84, no. 2 (2022), 891–905.

⁷⁶J. S Fishkin, *Democracy When the People Are Thinking: Revitalizing Our Politics through Public Deliberation*, Oxford University Press, 2021.

⁷⁷I. M Young, *Inclusion and Democracy*, Oxford University Press, 2020.

⁷⁸D. E Putnam, R. D., & Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, Simon & Schuster, 2021.

achieve a balance between group voice and the common good.⁷⁹ Thus, these three theories are epistemologically aligned: emotions guide preferences, deliberation provides a mechanism for evaluation and integration of perspectives, and identity politics provide a socio-cultural context in which political interactions take place, so that these combinations do not give rise to conceptual “talfiq”, but rather enrich the understanding of contemporary political dynamics.

Comparison with international and Indonesian contextualization

Comparative analysis with international literature shows that the use of religious identity-based narratives in political mobilization is not a phenomenon unique to Indonesia. Norris & Inglehart identify a global trend of increasing politics of belonging that utilizes primordial identity as a response to modernization and globalization. However, the Indonesian context has specific characteristics that distinguish it from cases in other countries.

First, Indonesia has a relatively moderate and syncretic Islamic tradition, which is different from the Middle East or South Asian contexts which are often a reference for studies on political Islam.⁸⁰ This creates a dynamic tension between the preservation of local traditions and the assertion of pan-Islamic identity which is a characteristic of mobilization based on the ummah narrative in Indonesia. *Second*, the context of Indonesia’s democratic transition and consolidation creates an institutional framework that allows the channeling of identity politics through formal democratic mechanisms, in contrast to the authoritarian context where identity politics is often a vehicle for opposition.⁸¹ This resulted in innovation in

⁷⁹R Norris, P., & Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019.

⁸⁰P. Mandaville, *Global Political Islam*, Routledge, 2020.

⁸¹Aspinall, “Democracy and Identity”...

mobilization strategies that combined identity-based appeals with electoral logic.

Comparative studies with India show interesting parallels in the use of Hindu nationalism, but with significant differences in terms of institutional response and civil society resistance.⁸² In Indonesia, civil society organizations such as NU and Muhammadiyah play a dual role as defenders of Muslim identity as well as promoters of tolerance, creating complexity that is not found in other contexts.

The analysis of three case studies also identified the emergence of various resistance and counter-narrative mechanisms developed by different actors. This counter-narrative is not always oppositional, but often in the form of re-interpretation or re-contextualization of the ummah narrative in a more inclusive framework.

In the context of the 212 Movement, the most effective counter-narrative comes from the internal Islamic community itself, especially from NU figures who develop a discourse on “Islam Nusantara” as an alternative to the literalist interpretation of Islam.⁸³ This counter-narrative is effective because it does not deny the legitimacy of religious references, but offers different interpretations of authentic Islamic values. In the 2019 and 2024 Indonesian Presidential Elections, the government and supporting coalition developed a strategy called “competitive religiosity,” in which religious legitimacy is sought through a demonstration commitment to Islamic values without necessarily adopting exclusive rhetoric.⁸⁴ This strategy includes the appointment of religious figures in strategic positions, the implementation of policies perceived as pro-Muslim, and participation in religious rituals and ceremonials.

⁸²A. Varshney, “Hindu Nationalism and India’s Democratic Politics”, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 31, no. 4 (2020), 47–61.

⁸³M. van Bruinessen, “The Politics of Shari’a Law”...

⁸⁴Muhtarom, “Political Islam”...

Civil society response has also developed in the form of interfaith dialogue initiatives, peace-building programs, and educational campaigns that promote critical thinking about religious interpretation.⁸⁵ However, the effectiveness of these initiatives is limited due to the often lack of resources and reach comparable to mobilization based on the ummah narrative.

An in-depth analysis of institutional impacts shows that the dominance of the ummah narrative has resulted in subtle but significant changes in the operation of Indonesian democratic institutions. These changes are not always formal institutional reforms, but often in the form of shifts in informal norms and practices that govern political behavior. In terms of rule of law, the study identified a trend towards selective enforcement based on religious considerations. Cases such as prosecution blasphemy charges and different treatment of minority religious groups show that religious narratives can influence judicial decision-making and law enforcement practices.⁸⁶

Parliamentary behavior is also changing, with an increasing tendency to frame policy debates in religious terms, even for essentially secular issues such as economic policy or environmental protection. This reflects what Bächtiger et al. call the “*Sacralization of Politics*”, where political discourse is increasingly dominated by moral and religious considerations. Electoral management institutions also face pressure to accommodate religious sensitivities in campaign regulation and candidate vetting, creating tension between the principles of equal treatment and the political reality of religious influence.⁸⁷ This shows that the impact of the ummah narrative extends beyond electoral outcomes to affect institutional operations itself.

⁸⁵Warburton, “Polarization in Indonesia”...

⁸⁶Bonar, “Religious Intolerance”...

⁸⁷Fossati, D., Warburton, E., Muhtadi, B., & Aspinall, “Ideological Representation”...

Conclusion

This research has analyzed the complex dynamics of the ummah narrative in contemporary Indonesian politics, focusing on the mechanism of emotional mobilization and its impact on the rationality of democracy. Through the analysis of three case studies, namely the 212 Movement, the 2019 Presidential Election, and the 2024 Presidential Election. This research identifies that ummah narratives operate through five main mechanisms: dichotomous framing that creates “us versus them” polarization, emotional contagion through social networks and digital media, legitimacy through references to religious authority, religious symbolism and political rituals, and victimization narratives.

The effectiveness of mobilization through the ummah narrative is influenced by contextual factors including political timing, organizational capacity, and responses from political elites and state institutions. The findings show that the ummah narrative is most effective when associated with controversial issues that already have emotional resonance, are supported by a strong organizational infrastructure, and occur in strategic political momentum. The impact of the dominance of the ummah narrative on the rationality of democracy is multidimensional and concerning. The research identified three main impacts: the degradation of the quality of public deliberation due to polarization and reduced space for rational debate, the erosion of political pluralism and the marginalization of minority groups through the creation of hierarchical citizenship, and the fragmentation of social cohesion that threatens the stability of democratic institutions.

A comparative analysis of the three case studies reveals a significant evolution in the strategy of using the ummah narrative, from confrontational grassroots mobilization in the 212 Movement, through institutionalization in the 2019 elections, to technological sophistication in

the 2024 elections. This evolution reflects the learning process of political actors as well as adaptation to changing political and technological contexts. The theoretical contributions of this research include the development of the concept of “sacred emotion” in the theory of emotional mobilization, the expansion of understanding of emotional contagion in the digital age, and the reconceptualization of the relationship between identity politics and democracy in non-Western contexts. This research shows that while identity-based mobilization can strengthen democratic participation, its exclusivist use can threaten fundamental democratic values such as pluralism and tolerance.

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