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Research Article

Democracy and the Religious Paradox:The Impact of Political Change on Islamic Identity in Muslim-Majority Countries

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Abstract: This study explores the paradox of democracy in Muslim-majority societies, particularly how democratic political systems influence the role of religion and the construction of religious identity. Employing a qualitative-descriptive approach through literature review and case studies in Indonesia and Turkey, this article finds that democracy opens participatory space for religious expression while simultaneously enabling the domination of majoritarian Islamic identity in the public sphere. This transformation leads to the fragmentation and commodification of religious identity, shifting it from a spiritual-transcendent value toward a symbolic-political function. In Indonesia, post-Reformasi democracy has fostered the expansion of conservative Islamic movements via electoral and social mobilization. In Turkey, democratization under the AKP regime has turned into religious populism that undermines secularism. The study concludes that democracy in Muslim-majority societies holds a paradoxical potential: it can serve as a medium for religious reform or become a tool for identity-based hegemony. Hence, strengthening institutions, political ethics, and reflective religious narratives is essential to make democracy a just and inclusive arena.

Keywords: Democracy; Islamic Identity; Muslim-Majority Society; Religious Politics; Religious Populism.

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, a wave of democratisation has swept across many Muslim-majority countries. These major political changes have not only affected institutional structures and governance, but also changed the way Muslims approach religion and religious identity. While the majority of Muslims generally express support for democratic values, the reality on the ground reveals a significant paradox: the level of democracy in these countries remains low or even shows democratic regression. This phenomenon has been the subject of numerous studies seeking to understand the contradiction between Muslim societies' preference for democracy and their vastly different political practices [1].

This trend is referred to as Islam's democracy paradox, which is the widespread support for democratic principles such as general elections or freedom of expression, yet on the other hand, democratic institutions in Muslim-majority countries have not developed as expected [1]. A similar phenomenon was observed in surveys by Gallup and the Pew Research Centre: despite loyalty to democracy, the majority of respondents stated that Sharia law should be the primary source of legislative law, indicating that religious identity remains a filter for the interpretation of democracy [2].

This paradox is not merely an intellectual dilemma but has serious implications for democratic institutions and the expression of Islamic identity in countries such as Indonesia, Turkey, or Tunisia. Democratisation creates a conducive public space for religious actors to

participate in politics, but this space is also often used as an arena for religious domination, leading to the exclusion of minority groups [3]. This situation reveals the dark side of democracy: freedom that opens the door to intolerant expression, sharpening religious identities in a political context.

Conceptually, this phenomenon must be understood within the framework of consensus and dissensus democracy theory. Fitri [4] shows that the democratic system in countries like Indonesia does not only operate through consensus but also through dissensus, where the majority's voice can suppress minorities in the name of political legitimacy. The consensus model relies on compromise, but political reality often faces the dominance of majority identities that exploit democratic procedures disproportionately.

In the context of political sociology theory, Religious identity changes due to democratisation have given rise to increasingly reflexive forms of identity. Özdemir [5] asserts that this reflexive narrative opens up new space for negotiation between religion and modernity, while An-Na'im [6] refers to it as a form of epistemological decolonisation of religious doctrine in liberal democratic systems. Muslims in a democratic context become actors who dialogue their identity through rational reasoning [7], choosing between spiritual Islam and political Islam. Özdemir [5] argues in his study that the formation of religious identity in a democratic state moves from an essentialist narrative to a reflexive narrative, which allows for cultural reform and negotiation within Islam.

On the other hand, theological responses to democracy are also diverse. Intellectual figures such as Ali 'Abd al Raziq [8] advocate the separation of religion and state (secularism) by stating that Islamic sacred texts do not determine the form of government, whereas Maududi (20th century) defends an 'Islamic democracy' based on shura, but rejects the supremacy of the people over God's law. These differences in thought further emphasise that democracy in the Muslim world is not merely a political system but an arena for competing interpretations of religious identity.

Empirical research in Muslim-majority countries such as Jordan [9], Tunisia, and post-Arab Spring Turkey also shows how democracy can be both a vehicle and a challenge for Islamic identity. Some moderate religious groups have emerged as political actors to moderate the political Islamic agenda, while conservative and extremist groups have utilised democratic space to formulate their religious identity politically.

Indonesia, as the largest Muslim-majority democracy, also exhibits similar dynamics. The post-1998 reforms provided significant space for religious expression in politics, which on one hand fostered pluralism, but on the other hand consolidated conservative religious identities. Political identity movements (such as Aksi Bela Islam) demonstrate how Islamic identity is used as a tool for mass political mobilisation. The existence of sharia-based local regulations in some regions further reinforces the existence of majority identities as a tool for local politics.

Given these phenomena, a thorough study is needed to explain how democracy not only shapes the political space but also transforms the identity and role of Islam in a majority society. Does democracy lead Islam toward inclusivity and reform, or does it reinforce fundamentalism and exclusive political identities? How do state institutions respond to this paradox to ensure that democracy is not used solely for the domination of the majority identity?

This research aims to answer these questions through a qualitative-descriptive approach, with a discourse analysis of academic literature, democratic index reports, and case studies of Indonesia and Turkey. It is hoped that through this conceptual and empirical formulation, practical implications for policy can be formulated so that the democratic system can support an inclusive religious discourse that does not marginalise minorities or reduce religion to a political instrument.

2. Literature Review

This theoretical study aims to establish a conceptual foundation regarding the relationship between democracy and religious identity in Muslim-majority societies by analysing theories of democracy, the sociology of identity, and Islamic political paradigms.

Modern democratic theory requires an understanding of the paradox of democracy in the context of Islam. In addition to the classic studies by Rowley & Smith [1] and Potrafke [10], recent research by Cammett & Jones [11] also highlights that democracy in the Muslim world is experiencing identity pressures and institutional stagnation due to non-inclusive

institutions. They demonstrate that Muslim societies broadly support democratic principles such as free elections and civil liberties, yet institutional democratic participation in Muslim-majority countries falls far short of expectations, despite being influenced by economic and demographic factors. This phenomenon is explained as the collapse of marginality: "people value highly that of which they have little." Further empirical findings, such as those by Potrafke [10], reaffirm the real deficit in democracy and freedom in Muslim-majority countries, using data from POLITY IV and Freedom House. From this perspective, an essential theoretical question arises: is Islam as a religion a structural cause of low-quality democracy?

In political sociology, Anthony Giddens' theory of structuration and identity reflexivity becomes highly relevant. Giddens asserts that in modern-late modern societies (late modernity), tradition is no longer the primary determinant of behaviour; instead, individuals must reflexively construct their own identities. This process enables the emergence of reflective religious identities, which are not merely inherited but consciously constructed within a socio-political context. Specifically in the context of majority Islam, democracy can facilitate this by dismantling old dogmatic structures, yet simultaneously challenging the integrity of traditional religious narratives, as it provides space for individuals to reflect and choose their own theological interpretations.

Giddens also emphasises the duality of structure, namely that social structures, including religion, not only regulate behaviour but are also reproduced by actors through their social actions. Religious identity, including Islam, becomes an entity that is politically utilised in power contests but is also reworked through democratic discourse and institutions. Old sources of religious discourse are compromised but also used as legitimisation in the arena of identity politics.

Furthermore, pluralist democracy theory views that democratic institutions must be accompanied by an ethical culture that supports the value of inclusivity. Ironically, democracy in Muslim-majority countries often facilitates religious majoritarianism. This argument is supported by Fitri's [12] research, which shows that Indonesian democracy after the Reformation was not entirely consensual, as the Islamic majority won legitimacy in sharia-based regions, while minorities were sometimes politically marginalised.

The paradigm of Islamic politics can also be analysed through two main poles. First, the emergence of ideas such as those of Ali 'Abd al Raziq, who demanded the separation of religion and state, shows a secular democratic interpretation that is compatible with Islam [8]. Second, the emergence of Maududi's idea of 'Islamic democracy,' which recognises democratic processes through shura and referendums, but still upholds the supremacy of sharia as the highest law. The difference between these paradigms reflects that Islamic identity in democracy is not a single entity, but rather an arena for ideological bargaining.

Theoretically, there are three main conditions in the interaction between Islam and democracy: (1) democracy as a reformative vehicle that empowers the community through reflective negotiation of religious discourse, (2) democracy as a political instrument of majority identity that expresses dogmatic attitudes through institutional legitimisation, and (3) the recombination of egalitarian democratic principles and theological discourse through the model of 'Islamic democracy'. All three are supported by a series of theories above Rowley & Smith [1] and Potrafke [10] in the realm of democracy, Giddens in the realm of reflexivity and structure, and contemporary Islamic political thought.

With this framework, further studies will link the concepts of democracy and reflexivity to the phenomenon of religious identity in Muslim-majority societies. Democracy is not merely a political framework, but a vehicle for the dialectic of identity that can strengthen inclusive pluralism or reinforce the exclusivity of the majority identity.

3. Research Methodology

This study uses a qualitative-descriptive approach with an exploratory design, which is oriented towards a deep understanding of the relational dynamics between democracy and religious identity transformation in a Muslim-majority society. The qualitative approach was chosen because it is considered most relevant for exploring meanings, symbols, and socio-political constructions that are contextual and complex, as stated by Creswell [13] that qualitative methods are suitable for explaining phenomena that contain many social and interpretative dimensions that cannot be measured quantitatively or reduced to mere numbers [13].

This type of research is more specifically based on library research or literature research that relies on secondary data in the form of books, indexed scientific journals, global democracy reports, and relevant documents from democracy and religious freedom monitoring institutions such as Freedom House, Pew Research Centre, The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), and V-Dem Institute. This approach draws on Neuman's [14] argument that in the study of policy and socio-political phenomena, literature review enables researchers to construct scientific arguments systematically through deductive and inductive reasoning from validated academic sources [14].

In constructing narratives and analyses, this study adopts the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach as developed by Norman Fairclough. CDA is used to read the dynamics of religious and political discourse in the public sphere, as well as how religious identity discourse is constructed, negotiated, and capitalised upon by political actors in a democratic space. Fairclough [15] states that critical discourse analysis can reveal hidden practices of power in texts, including legal, political, and media texts, which are relevant in the context of this study where religious identity is part of democratic political contestation [15].

The units of analysis in this study include:

- Political and religious narratives in Muslim-majority societies through scientific journal articles,
- Religion-based policies or regulations produced in democratic systems,
- Case studies of countries representing two spectrums of Islamic democracy: Indonesia and Turkey.

The selection of Indonesia and Turkey as case studies is based on considerations of their differing geopolitical and ideological characteristics, yet both are countries with Muslim majorities and have relatively strong democratic experiences. Indonesia represents a pluralistic democracy with an inclusive institutional structure based on Pancasila, yet has seen an increase in political Islamic conservatism over the past two decades [16]. Meanwhile, Turkey, under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) regime, has shown democratic regression with increased state control over religious institutions, while also representing 'state Islamism' [17].

Data collection techniques were carried out through documentation and systematic review of scientific works, indexed journal articles, reports on democracy and religious freedom, and relevant social survey results. In this process, the researcher used inclusion criteria in the form of sources that: (1) were published within the last 10 years (2013–2023), (2) originated from Scopus or DOAJ indexed journals, and (3) were directly related to the themes of democracy, religious identity, and Muslim society.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis to identify key patterns in the texts regarding the relationship between democracy and religious identity. Data were analysed in stages: (1) intensive reading, (2) categorisation of main themes (e.g., political Islam, majoritarian democracy, dynamic secularism, religious conservatism), (3) interpretation of the relationships between categories, and (4) formulation of academic arguments based on triangulation of references. This approach draws on techniques developed by Braun & Clarke [18] within the framework of thematic analysis of qualitative data in social research.

With this methodology, this research does not aim to generalise findings quantitatively, but offers an interpretative and theoretical reading of the complex relationship between the democratic system and the dynamics of Islamic identity in a Muslim-majority society. This research contributes to enriching the literature on the democratisation of the Islamic world while opening up space for critical dialogue on the dominance of religious identity politics in contemporary democratic systems.

4. Results and Discussion

The results of an analysis of literature, documents, and case studies of Muslim-majority countries such as Indonesia and Turkey show that democracy plays an ambivalent role in relation to religion. On the one hand, democracy opens up broad participatory space for religious expression. On the other hand, it also creates a space that allows for the dominance of the majority religious identity, even leading to the exclusion of groups with different beliefs. This tension forms the religious-democratic paradox, where a political system that should guarantee freedom and equality is instead used to strengthen religious-based power.

In Indonesia, since the 1998 Reformation era, religion, especially Islam, has gained extensive space for expression in the political arena. The civil liberties offered by democracy

have enabled various Islamic groups, both moderate and conservative, to emerge as major political actors. The Aksi Bela Islam (ABI) phenomenon in 2016 is a clear example of how religion can be mobilised as a powerful political tool. ABI also represents a form of Islamic populism in Indonesia's democratic landscape, where religious expression is not merely an articulation of faith, but also an electoral mobilisation strategy ([19], [20]). Triggered by a statement made by the then Governor of Jakarta, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok), ABI successfully mobilised millions of Muslims onto the streets, demanding justice on the basis of blasphemy. However, behind these religious demands lies a highly complex political dynamic involving party elites, funding networks, and structured digital mobilisation. Fealy's [16] research highlights that ABI is not merely a manifestation of religious spontaneity, but also a form of contemporary Islamic populism driven by specific political interests and exploiting religious sentiment to delegitimise political opponents.

Post-Reform Indonesia's democracy has also witnessed the expansion of Sharia regulations in various regions, reflecting how the religious identity of the majority has been formalised into state regulations. This demonstrates that democracy, which is normatively expected to be neutral towards all expressions of belief, in practice provides opportunities for the symbolic dominance of certain religions. Within the framework of discourse analysis, this can be read as a form of institutionalisation of Islamic identity, which was previously cultural in nature, into a political identity rooted in the spirit of majoritarianism.

Meanwhile, in Turkey, democracy has undergone a very interesting evolution since the victory of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in the early 2000s. The AKP government under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has systematically repositioned Islam at the heart of the state structure. This transformation has been supported by instruments of religious populism, extensively studied by Yilmaz and Morieson [21], which show that the AKP has adopted a strategy of populist Islamism to maintain its cultural and symbolic political dominance in Turkish public space, including through the strengthening of the Diyanet religious institution, changes to the national education curriculum that emphasise Islamic morality, and restrictions on the secular public sphere. One of the most symbolic examples of this shift is the conversion of Hagia Sophia from a museum to a mosque in 2020, which many observers interpret as a symbolic step to strengthen the country's neo-Ottomanist and pan-Islamist narrative. Yavuz's [17] research states that the transformation of democracy in Turkey has ended in the form of illiberal democracy with a strong religious populist character, where Islam is used as an instrument to secure the legitimacy of power, rather than as an expression of open faith.

In both Indonesia and Turkey, religious identity within the framework of democracy has undergone two simultaneous processes: fragmentation and commodification. Research by Rahmat [22] and Halida et al. [23] shows that the commodification of Islamic identity is often mass-produced through digital narratives that politicise religious symbols in the logic of the political market. Fragmentation has occurred because democracy has opened up a diversity of expressions of Islam, ranging from moderate to conservative to extremist, which were previously restricted by the state. However, on the other hand, these expressions of identity are often not purely ideological, but have entered into the logic of the political market. Islamic identity has become a political commodity that can be capitalised on to gain mass support. Political parties, religious leaders, and even media institutions consciously shape a certain image of Islam in order to access power and legitimacy.

The transformation of religious identity in the context of democracy becomes more complex when linked to the development of digital technology. Social media plays a significant role in selectively and rapidly disseminating narratives of religious identity. In a study by Aisyah [24], it is mentioned that religious propaganda emphasising the superiority of a particular religion often gains widespread space in digital media because media algorithms tend to prioritise sensational and emotional content over rational content. This phenomenon further widens the gap between reflective religious identity and exclusive and defensive identity, which tends to be displayed in digital spaces.

In a broader theoretical review, democracy in a Muslim-majority society can be understood as a contest between two major paradigms. First, the inclusive paradigm, which views democracy as a space for reforming religious identity towards greater rationality, openness, and compatibility with pluralism. Second, the exclusive paradigm, which views democracy as a tool to reinforce the superiority of the majority identity and suppress differences. The paradox of religious democracy emerges when these two paradigms compete in the same space, without clear ethical and institutional boundaries.

This reality shows that democracy is not automatically a neutral system. It is highly dependent on the actors, institutions, and narratives that fill its space. If state institutions and civil society are not strong enough to maintain a balance between freedom and responsibility, democracy will tend to fall into oppressive majoritarianism. This is where the importance of strengthening political ethical values, national education, and awareness of the importance of the boundaries between religion as a source of values and religion as an instrument of power lies. In this context, democracy in a Muslim-majority society requires reinterpretation and strengthening of instruments so that it does not become a path to the decline of pluralism, but rather a medium for building an inclusive and transformative public space.

5. Conclusion

This study shows that democracy in countries with Muslim-majority populations is not a neutral space for civil liberties and religious expression, but rather an arena fraught with tension between universal democratic values and the dominance of the majority religious identity. Rather than creating an inclusive public space, democracy in this context is often exploited by political and religious actors to consolidate the hegemony of a particular Islamic identity. This phenomenon is evident in symbolic politics, religiously-based mass mobilisation, and the formalisation of religious regulations that limit diversity. Case studies of Indonesia and Turkey underscore that democratisation does not necessarily result in a pluralistic and tolerant society. On the contrary, democracy can reinforce exclusivism if it is not balanced by strong institutions, inclusive public ethics, and reflective religious narratives. Islamic identity in a democratic system tends to undergo a process of fragmentation and commodification, distancing the faithful from the transcendental values of religion itself. Therefore, serious efforts are needed to reconstruct democracy as an ethical framework for religious diversity rather than as a tool for the domination of the majority identity. The state and civil society must work together to strengthen democratic governance that guarantees justice for all groups, and to build a religious consciousness that is not exclusive and political, but spiritual and inclusive. Democracy is not merely an electoral procedure, but a civilisational process that demands the maturity of collective identity.

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