



Islam, Democracy, and Digital Religious Influencers: Reconfiguring Political Authority in Contemporary Indonesia

Islam, Demokrasi, dan Tokoh Agama Berpengaruh di Dunia Digital: Membentuk Kembali Otoritas Politik di Indonesia Kontemporer

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Abstract

Digital media has transformed the relationship between religion, politics, and public authority by enabling religious influencers to shape political discourse beyond traditional institutional structures. In Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim-majority democracy, digital religious influencers have become increasingly influential during elections, policy debates, and discussions concerning national identity. However, existing literature has primarily focused on conventional religious organizations, leaving the political significance of digital religious authority insufficiently explored. This study examines how digital religious influencers reshape political authority, democratic participation, and public opinion in contemporary Indonesia. Drawing upon theories of digital religion, political communication, and democratic governance, the research employs qualitative content analysis of social media platforms, complemented by interviews with religious scholars, digital content creators, policymakers, and civil society

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organizations. The findings suggest that digital platforms decentralize religious authority by enabling new actors to mobilize political support, frame policy debates, and influence electoral preferences independently of established institutions. At the same time, algorithm-driven visibility and online polarization create new governance challenges related to misinformation, identity politics, and democratic deliberation. The article argues that Indonesia represents an important case for understanding how digitalization transforms religious authority within democratic systems across the Global South. The study contributes to comparative scholarship by proposing a conceptual framework linking digital religious authority, political legitimacy, and democratic resilience. It concludes that effective democratic governance increasingly requires policies that promote digital literacy, transparent platform governance, and inclusive civic engagement while safeguarding religious freedom and democratic pluralism.

Keywords: *Digital Religion, Political Communication, Democracy, Religious Influencers, Indonesia*

Abstrak

Media digital telah mengubah hubungan antara agama, politik, dan otoritas publik dengan memungkinkan para tokoh agama berpengaruh untuk membentuk wacana politik di luar struktur kelembagaan tradisional. Di Indonesia, negara demokrasi mayoritas Muslim terbesar di dunia, tokoh agama berpengaruh digital semakin berpengaruh selama pemilihan umum, debat kebijakan, dan diskusi mengenai identitas nasional. Namun, literatur yang ada sebagian besar berfokus pada organisasi keagamaan konvensional, sehingga signifikansi politik dari otoritas keagamaan digital belum cukup dieksplorasi. Studi ini meneliti bagaimana tokoh agama berpengaruh digital membentuk kembali otoritas politik, partisipasi demokratis, dan opini publik di Indonesia kontemporer. Dengan mengacu pada teori-teori agama digital, komunikasi politik, dan tata kelola demokrasi, penelitian ini menggunakan analisis konten kualitatif dari platform media sosial, dilengkapi dengan wawancara dengan para cendekiawan agama, kreator konten digital, pembuat kebijakan, dan organisasi masyarakat sipil. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa platform digital mendesentralisasi otoritas keagamaan dengan memungkinkan

aktor-aktor baru untuk memobilisasi dukungan politik, membingkai debat kebijakan, dan memengaruhi preferensi elektoral secara independen dari lembaga-lembaga yang sudah mapan. Pada saat yang sama, visibilitas yang didorong oleh algoritma dan polarisasi daring menciptakan tantangan tata kelola baru yang terkait dengan misinformasi, politik identitas, dan deliberasi demokratis. Artikel ini berpendapat bahwa Indonesia merupakan studi kasus penting untuk memahami bagaimana digitalisasi mentransformasikan otoritas keagamaan dalam sistem demokrasi di seluruh negara-negara Selatan. Studi ini berkontribusi pada kajian komparatif dengan mengusulkan kerangka konseptual yang menghubungkan otoritas keagamaan digital, legitimasi politik, dan ketahanan demokrasi. Kesimpulannya, tata kelola demokrasi yang efektif semakin membutuhkan kebijakan yang mendorong literasi digital, tata kelola platform yang transparan, dan keterlibatan warga yang inklusif sambil tetap menjaga kebebasan beragama dan pluralisme demokrasi.

Kata kunci: *Agama Digital, Komunikasi Politik, Demokrasi, Tokoh Agama Berpengaruh, Indonesia*

I. INTRODUCTION

The intersection between religion, democracy, and digital communication has become one of the most significant areas of inquiry in contemporary political studies. The expansion of digital platforms has transformed how political ideas are produced, circulated, and contested, creating new forms of authority that operate beyond traditional institutional boundaries. In democratic societies, digital media does not merely function as a technological infrastructure for communication; it reshapes relationships between citizens, political actors, and sources of social legitimacy. As political discourse increasingly migrates into online environments, authority is no longer exclusively controlled by established institutions such as political parties, religious organizations, or state institutions, but is increasingly negotiated

through networks of digital actors, influencers, and online communities (Castells 2013; Chadwick 2017).

This transformation is particularly significant in societies where religion remains deeply embedded within political and social life. In many Muslim-majority democracies, religious authority has historically been shaped by formal institutions, scholarly traditions, and organizational structures. However, digital platforms have disrupted these conventional arrangements by enabling individual actors to produce religious narratives, interpret social issues, and participate in political debates without institutional authorization. The emergence of digital religious influencers represents a new form of authority based not solely on theological expertise or organizational affiliation, but also on visibility, audience engagement, and algorithmic circulation (Campbell 2010; Bunt 2018).

Indonesia provides a critical case for examining this transformation because it combines three important characteristics: a large Muslim population, a relatively competitive democratic system, and one of the world's most active digital societies. As the largest Muslim-majority democracy globally, Indonesia has long attracted scholarly attention regarding the relationship between Islam and democratic governance. Previous studies have demonstrated that Indonesian Islam is characterized by significant diversity, ranging from moderate and pluralist organizations to more conservative movements that engage with questions of identity, morality, and political representation (Hefner 2000; Barton 2005; Fealy and White 2008). The country's democratic development after the Reformasi period has therefore been shaped by continuous negotiation between religious values, democratic institutions, and political competition.

Existing scholarship on Islam and Indonesian politics has primarily examined established religious organizations and institutional actors. Studies of organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah have highlighted their historical roles in shaping civil society, democratic norms, and political

participation (Hefner 2000; Bush 2009). Other studies have examined the rise of Islamic political movements, identity politics, and religious mobilization in electoral competition (Barton, Yilmaz, and Morieson 2021; Power and Warburton 2020). These contributions have significantly advanced understanding of Islam's relationship with Indonesian democracy; however, they have largely focused on organizational structures, political parties, and offline religious networks.

The expansion of digital platforms challenges these conventional approaches by introducing new actors who operate outside established religious institutions. Digital religious influencers—including online preachers, Islamic content creators, and social media-based religious personalities—have become increasingly important actors in shaping public debates regarding morality, national identity, political leadership, and public policy. Unlike traditional religious authorities whose legitimacy is often derived from educational credentials, institutional positions, or organizational recognition, digital religious influencers construct authority through visibility, personal branding, emotional connection, and continuous interaction with online audiences (Campbell 2010; Evolvi 2021).

The emergence of digital religious authority raises important questions regarding the transformation of political communication in democratic societies. Political communication scholarship has demonstrated that digital media enables new forms of participation by lowering barriers to political expression and allowing previously marginalized actors to enter public debates (Chadwick 2017; Bennett and Segerberg 2013). However, digital platforms also introduce challenges related to polarization, misinformation, algorithmic amplification, and the fragmentation of public discourse. As Sunstein (2018) argues, digital environments may encourage ideological clustering by exposing users primarily to information consistent with existing beliefs, potentially weakening democratic deliberation.

In Indonesia, these dynamics have become increasingly visible during electoral periods and political controversies involving religious identity. Digital religious influencers have participated in shaping political narratives by interpreting elections, evaluating political candidates, framing public policies through religious perspectives, and mobilizing online communities. Their influence demonstrates that political authority in contemporary Indonesia is no longer produced exclusively through formal political institutions or established religious organizations but also through digitally mediated networks of influence.

Nevertheless, existing studies have not sufficiently examined how digital religious influencers transform the relationship between religious authority and democratic politics. Research on digital religion has primarily focused on changes in religious practice, online identity formation, and the mediation of religious experiences (Campbell 2010; Hoover 2016). Meanwhile, political communication studies have examined digital mobilization and online activism but have paid less attention to religious authority as a political resource within democratic systems. Similarly, studies of Indonesian Islamic politics have extensively analyzed religious organizations and identity movements but have not fully addressed how digital platforms create alternative forms of religious legitimacy.

This gap is theoretically important because digital religious influencers represent more than a new communication phenomenon; they signify a transformation in the structure of political authority itself. Traditional approaches often conceptualize authority as institutional, hierarchical, and embedded within established organizations. However, digital environments create networked forms of authority where influence is generated through audience relationships, platform visibility, and communicative performance. As Castells (2013) argues, power in network societies increasingly depends on the ability to construct meaning and shape communication flows. Religious influencers

therefore occupy an emerging position where religious interpretation, political communication, and digital popularity intersect.

This article argues that digital religious influencers are reshaping political authority in contemporary Indonesia by creating new mechanisms of religious legitimacy, political mobilization, and democratic participation. Rather than replacing traditional religious institutions, digital influencers create a parallel authority structure that interacts with, challenges, and sometimes reinforces existing religious and political actors. This transformation produces both democratic opportunities and governance challenges: while digital religious actors expand participation by enabling broader engagement in public debates, they may also contribute to political polarization, misinformation, and identity-based mobilization.

To examine this phenomenon, this study integrates insights from digital religion studies, political communication theory, and democratic governance literature. The article investigates three central questions: First, how do digital religious influencers construct and legitimize authority within online environments? Second, how do these actors influence political discourse and democratic participation in Indonesia? Third, what implications do digital religious authorities create for democratic governance and religious pluralism?

Methodologically, the study employs qualitative analysis of digital religious content across social media platforms, complemented by interviews with religious scholars, digital content creators, policymakers, and civil society organizations. This approach enables the study to examine not only the content produced by digital religious actors but also the broader political and social mechanisms through which digital authority is constructed.

The article makes three contributions to existing scholarship. First, it contributes to digital religion studies by demonstrating that online religious authority has significant political implications

beyond religious communication. Second, it advances political communication research by highlighting how digital platforms create alternative forms of political influence within democratic contexts. Third, it contributes to studies of Islam and democracy by positioning Indonesia as an important case for understanding how religious authority is transformed in the digital era across the Global South.

The central argument of this article is that digital religious influencers represent a new form of political authority emerging from the interaction between religious legitimacy, digital visibility, and democratic participation. Indonesia demonstrates that digitalization does not simply weaken traditional religious authority; rather, it reorganizes the mechanisms through which authority is produced and contested. Understanding this transformation is essential for analyzing the future of democratic governance in societies where religion and digital communication increasingly shape political life.

II. FROM INSTITUTIONAL *ULAMA* TO DIGITAL RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY: THE TRANSFORMATION OF ISLAMIC PUBLIC AUTHORITY IN INDONESIA

The transformation of religious authority in Indonesia cannot be understood separately from the broader historical relationship between Islam, social institutions, and democratic development. For decades, Islamic authority in Indonesia has largely been organized through established religious institutions, scholarly networks, educational systems, and mass-based organizations. Religious legitimacy was traditionally associated with recognized expertise, theological knowledge, institutional affiliation, and social recognition within Muslim communities. Organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah have historically played central roles in producing religious discourse, shaping Islamic education, and mediating relationships between religion and public

life (Hefner 2000; Bush 2009). Through these institutional structures, religious authority developed through relatively stable mechanisms of recognition and social trust.

The institutional character of Islamic authority in Indonesia was closely connected to the broader development of civil Islam. Hefner (2000) argues that Indonesian Muslim organizations contributed significantly to democratic development by promoting forms of Islamic engagement compatible with pluralism, citizenship, and constitutional politics. Rather than representing a simple opposition between Islam and democracy, Indonesian Islamic organizations demonstrated how religious institutions could become important actors in democratic consolidation. Their influence was based not only on religious interpretation but also on extensive organizational networks, educational institutions, and community-based legitimacy.

However, the emergence of digital platforms has fundamentally altered the mechanisms through which religious authority is produced and recognized. Digital media has disrupted the assumption that religious authority must originate from formal institutions or established scholarly hierarchies. Through platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and other social media networks, individuals without traditional institutional positions can gain substantial influence by producing religious content, engaging audiences, and constructing personal credibility online. This transformation reflects what Campbell (2010) describes as the emergence of digitally mediated religious authority, where online environments reshape how religious knowledge is created, transmitted, and validated.

The rise of digital religious influencers represents a shift from institutional authority toward networked authority. In traditional religious settings, authority is often connected to educational credentials, scholarly lineage, and institutional recognition. In contrast, digital religious authority is increasingly constructed through visibility, communication skills, audience interaction, and algorithmic amplification. Bunt (2018) argues that digital Islamic

environments have created new forms of religious influence in which authority emerges through online participation rather than exclusively through formal religious credentials. Consequently, the question of who possesses religious authority has become increasingly contested in digital societies.

This transformation does not necessarily indicate the disappearance of traditional religious institutions. Instead, digital religious authority operates through interaction and competition with existing structures of Islamic legitimacy. Digital influencers frequently draw upon established religious traditions, scholarly references, and organizational identities while simultaneously adapting religious communication to the logic of digital platforms. In this sense, digitalization produces a hybrid religious authority structure where traditional and digital forms of legitimacy coexist and influence one another (Evolvi 2021).

The Indonesian context demonstrates this hybridization particularly clearly. Many digital religious influencers build their online identities by combining religious knowledge with contemporary communication strategies. Their authority is often reinforced through personal narratives, emotional storytelling, visual presentation, and continuous engagement with followers. Unlike traditional religious scholars whose authority develops through years of institutional training and community recognition, digital influencers can rapidly accumulate audiences through platform-based visibility. This creates a new relationship between religious authority and popularity, where influence is increasingly measured through followers, engagement rates, and online circulation.

The emergence of digital religious authority also reflects broader transformations in the sociology of knowledge. Traditional models of religious authority were based on relatively centralized systems of interpretation, where recognized scholars and institutions controlled the production of religious discourse. Digital platforms decentralize this process by allowing multiple actors to participate in religious interpretation. As Hoover (2016) argues,

contemporary media environments transform religious authority by expanding the number of actors capable of producing and distributing religious meanings.

Nevertheless, decentralization does not automatically produce greater democratic religious participation. While digital platforms provide opportunities for broader engagement, they also introduce new forms of inequality and competition. Algorithmic systems determine which religious narratives receive greater visibility, meaning that online influence is shaped not only by theological quality but also by platform dynamics. Content that generates strong emotional reactions, controversy, or frequent engagement may receive greater algorithmic exposure than more nuanced religious discussions. Therefore, digital religious authority is partly shaped by technological infrastructures that operate according to commercial and attention-based logics (Couldry and Hepp 2017).

This development creates important implications for understanding political authority in Indonesia. Religious authority has historically influenced political behavior through institutional channels, including religious organizations, political parties, and community networks. However, digital religious influencers introduce alternative pathways through which religious narratives enter political discourse. By shaping interpretations of elections, leadership, public morality, and national identity, these actors increasingly participate in political communication without necessarily occupying formal political positions.

The transformation of religious authority therefore has significant consequences for democratic politics. Political communication scholarship emphasizes that digital media has altered the relationship between citizens and political actors by enabling decentralized forms of participation and mobilization (Chadwick 2017). In religious societies such as Indonesia, this transformation intersects with existing patterns of Islamic identity and political engagement. Digital religious influencers can mobilize

communities, frame political issues, and influence public opinion through religious narratives that resonate with online audiences.

However, the political influence of digital religious actors must be analyzed carefully. Their authority is not equivalent to formal political power, but it represents a form of symbolic and communicative power. Castells (2013) argues that power in network societies increasingly operates through the ability to shape communication flows and construct meanings. From this perspective, digital religious influencers exercise political influence by influencing how audiences interpret political events rather than simply directing political behavior.

This transformation also challenges existing analytical approaches to Islam and democracy in Indonesia. Previous studies have often examined religious politics through organizations, parties, and institutional actors (Fealy and White 2008; Power and Warburton 2020). While these approaches remain essential, they do not fully capture the emerging forms of authority produced within digital environments. Digital religious influencers represent a new category of political-religious actors whose influence operates through communication networks rather than traditional organizational structures.

The shift from institutional to digital authority therefore represents a broader transformation in Indonesia's Islamic public sphere. It reflects a movement from hierarchical models of religious legitimacy toward more networked, personalized, and mediated forms of influence. This transformation creates both opportunities and challenges: it expands participation by allowing new voices to enter religious and political discussions, but it also raises concerns regarding accountability, expertise, and the quality of democratic deliberation.

Ultimately, the emergence of digital religious influencers demonstrates that religious authority in contemporary Indonesia is undergoing a process of reconfiguration rather than replacement. Traditional institutions remain important sources of legitimacy, but digital platforms have created alternative pathways through which

religious actors construct influence and participate in public life. Understanding this transformation is essential for analyzing how Islam, democracy, and political communication interact in the digital era.

III. DIGITAL RELIGIOUS INFLUENCERS AND DEMOCRATIC POLITICS: MOBILIZATION, IDENTITY FORMATION, AND ELECTORAL INFLUENCE

The emergence of digital religious influencers has significantly transformed the relationship between religious communication and democratic politics in Indonesia. While traditional religious organizations historically mediated the relationship between Islam and political participation through institutional structures, digital platforms have created new channels through which religious narratives enter political debates. Religious influencers do not necessarily operate as formal political actors, yet their ability to construct narratives, mobilize audiences, and shape public perceptions provides them with a form of political influence that increasingly affects democratic processes.

The political significance of digital religious influencers can be understood through the concept of mediated political communication. In contemporary democracies, political influence is increasingly exercised through communication networks rather than exclusively through formal institutions such as political parties or government organizations. Chadwick (2017) argues that the contemporary media environment represents a hybrid system in which traditional political institutions interact with digital actors, producing new configurations of political power. Within this environment, religious influencers become important intermediaries who translate political issues into religiously meaningful narratives for digital communities.

In Indonesia, religious narratives have historically played an important role in shaping political identity and public debate.

Scholars have demonstrated that Islamic identity has periodically become a significant component of electoral competition, particularly when political actors frame issues through religious symbols, moral narratives, and collective identities (Power and Warburton 2020). Digital platforms intensify this process by allowing religious narratives to circulate rapidly and reach audiences beyond conventional organizational networks. As a result, religious influencers can participate in political communication without necessarily being affiliated with political parties or formal religious institutions.

One of the most important mechanisms through which digital religious influencers exercise political influence is framing. Political framing refers to the process through which actors define problems, interpret events, and promote particular understandings of social and political realities (Entman 1993). Religious influencers often frame political issues through moral and theological perspectives, transforming complex policy debates into questions of religious values, justice, identity, and collective responsibility. Through this process, political preferences may become connected with religious meanings, creating stronger emotional and symbolic connections among audiences.

The effectiveness of religious framing in digital environments is closely connected to the relationship between identity and political participation. Social identity theory suggests that individuals often interpret political information through existing group identities and social affiliations (Tajfel and Turner 1986). In religious societies, political messages associated with religious identity may therefore generate stronger engagement because they connect political choices with broader questions of belonging and moral commitment. Digital religious influencers are particularly effective in this process because they communicate through personalized narratives that combine religious interpretation with everyday experiences.

Unlike traditional religious institutions that often communicate through formal channels, digital influencers develop

authority through intimacy and continuous interaction. Their communication style frequently emphasizes personal connection, direct engagement, and emotional authenticity. This reflects broader transformations in digital politics where citizens increasingly respond to personalized forms of communication rather than institutional messaging (Bennett and Segerberg 2013). The perceived authenticity of influencers can strengthen their ability to shape political attitudes because followers may interpret their messages as personal guidance rather than institutional propaganda.

However, the personalization of religious authority also changes the nature of political mobilization. Traditional Islamic organizations in Indonesia have historically relied on structured networks, educational institutions, and community-based activities to mobilize political participation (Hefner 2000; Bush 2009). Digital religious influencers, by contrast, mobilize through networks of followers connected by shared narratives and online engagement. This form of mobilization is less hierarchical and more fluid, allowing political messages to spread rapidly across digital communities.

This transformation reflects what Bennett and Segerberg (2013) describe as the logic of connective action, where political participation increasingly occurs through personalized networks rather than formal collective organizations. Digital religious influencers exemplify this logic because their political influence often emerges from individual-centered communication rather than organizational membership. Followers may participate in political discussions, share content, or support particular causes based on personal identification with the influencer rather than institutional affiliation.

Nevertheless, the political influence of digital religious influencers should not be interpreted as a complete replacement of traditional Islamic organizations. Instead, digital authority operates alongside existing religious structures. Many influencers maintain connections with established religious traditions, scholars, or

organizations, while simultaneously adapting religious communication to digital environments. This creates a hybrid model of political-religious authority in which institutional legitimacy and digital popularity interact.

The electoral significance of digital religious influencers became increasingly visible during Indonesia's recent electoral cycles. Digital platforms provided spaces where religious narratives, political evaluations, and discussions of national leadership were continuously negotiated. Influencers participated in shaping perceptions of candidates by emphasizing themes such as morality, religious commitment, nationalism, and social justice. In this context, digital religious communication became part of broader electoral competition over symbolic legitimacy.

The influence of digital religious actors in elections illustrates the changing nature of political authority in democratic societies. Traditional approaches often conceptualize political influence through formal institutions, electoral organizations, and elite actors. However, digital environments demonstrate that political influence can also emerge from actors who control communication networks and symbolic narratives. Castells (2013) argues that power in network societies increasingly depends on the capacity to shape meaning and control communication flows. Digital religious influencers therefore exercise power primarily through narrative construction rather than institutional authority.

At the same time, the political role of religious influencers generates important democratic concerns. One major challenge concerns the relationship between religious identity and political polarization. Digital platforms often reward content that generates strong emotional engagement, including controversial or identity-based narratives. Sunstein (2018) argues that online environments may contribute to polarization by creating fragmented communities where users are repeatedly exposed to similar viewpoints. In religious and political contexts, this dynamic may intensify divisions between different social groups.

The spread of religiously framed political narratives can also create challenges related to misinformation and democratic deliberation. Digital religious influencers operate in an environment where information verification mechanisms are often limited, and religious authority may be conflated with political credibility. When religious messages become closely associated with political claims, audiences may evaluate information based on identity and trust rather than evidence. This creates challenges for democratic communication because effective deliberation requires access to reliable information and openness to alternative perspectives.

Furthermore, the algorithmic structure of digital platforms influences which religious and political narratives become visible. Unlike traditional public spheres where institutions and professional media organizations played significant gatekeeping roles, digital platforms distribute visibility through algorithmic systems. Gillespie (2014) argues that algorithms are not neutral mechanisms but shape public visibility by prioritizing particular forms of content. Consequently, digital religious authority is partly dependent on platform infrastructures that may privilege emotional, simplified, or polarizing messages.

These challenges demonstrate that digital religious influencers represent both democratic opportunities and democratic risks. On one hand, they expand political participation by enabling citizens to engage with religious and political discussions beyond institutional boundaries. They provide new spaces for marginalized voices and contribute to a more diverse public sphere. On the other hand, their influence raises questions regarding accountability, expertise, and the potential misuse of religious authority for political mobilization.

The Indonesian case therefore reveals a fundamental transformation in the relationship between religion and democracy. Digital religious influencers have become significant actors not because they replace traditional religious institutions, but because they reshape how religious legitimacy operates within democratic

communication systems. Their influence demonstrates that political authority in contemporary Indonesia increasingly depends on the ability to produce, circulate, and legitimize narratives within digital networks.

Ultimately, the political role of digital religious influencers reflects the broader transformation of democratic participation in the digital age. Democracy is no longer shaped only by elections, parties, and formal institutions but also by actors who influence public interpretation and collective identity through communication platforms. Understanding this transformation is essential for evaluating how religious authority, digital media, and democratic governance interact in contemporary Indonesia.

IV. ALGORITHMIC RELIGION AND DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE: POLARIZATION, REGULATION, AND THE FUTURE OF DIGITAL ISLAMIC PUBLIC SPHERE

The transformation of religious authority through digital platforms cannot be separated from the technological infrastructures that organize visibility, attention, and interaction. While digital religious influencers appear to exercise authority through personal communication and audience engagement, their influence is significantly shaped by algorithmic systems that determine which content becomes visible and which narratives remain marginalized. Consequently, contemporary digital religious authority is not only a social and cultural phenomenon but also a technological and political process. Understanding the future of the Islamic public sphere in Indonesia therefore requires examining how algorithmic systems reshape the production of religious knowledge, political communication, and democratic participation.

Traditional theories of religious authority generally emphasize human actors, institutional structures, and social recognition as the foundations of legitimacy. However, digital

platforms introduce an additional dimension: technological mediation. Religious messages are increasingly filtered through platform architectures that prioritize engagement, interaction, and user retention. Gillespie (2014) argues that algorithms function as important mechanisms of social organization because they influence what information becomes publicly visible. In this context, digital religious authority is partially produced through algorithmic systems that amplify certain forms of religious communication while limiting others.

This development creates a significant transformation in the Islamic public sphere. Historically, religious discourse in Indonesia was shaped by institutions that performed interpretive and educational functions, including Islamic organizations, religious schools, and scholarly networks. These institutions operated through relatively established mechanisms of knowledge production and validation (Hefner 2000). Digital platforms, however, introduce a more decentralized environment where religious discourse circulates through networks of users, influencers, and algorithmic recommendation systems. As a result, authority becomes increasingly connected to visibility rather than exclusively to scholarly recognition.

The importance of visibility in digital environments changes the incentives surrounding religious communication. Content creators are encouraged to produce messages that attract attention, generate emotional responses, and encourage interaction. This does not necessarily indicate a decline in religious quality, but it creates structural pressures toward simplification, personalization, and dramatization. Couldry and Hepp (2017) argue that contemporary societies are increasingly shaped by processes of deep mediatization, where media technologies influence not only communication practices but also social realities themselves. In the context of digital religion, this means that religious meanings are increasingly constructed within technological environments governed by specific economic and algorithmic logics.

The relationship between algorithms and religious authority has important implications for democratic governance. Democratic deliberation depends on the availability of diverse information, rational discussion, and the ability of citizens to encounter alternative perspectives (Habermas 1996). However, digital platforms may produce fragmented communication environments where individuals are exposed primarily to content aligned with existing beliefs. Sunstein (2018) argues that online personalization can intensify ideological polarization by creating echo chambers and reducing exposure to competing viewpoints.

In Indonesia, these dynamics intersect with existing patterns of religious and political identity. Religious narratives have historically been influential in shaping political debates, particularly concerning questions of morality, leadership, and national identity. Digital platforms amplify these debates by enabling religious messages to circulate rapidly across communities. When political issues become framed primarily through religious identity, online discussions may shift from policy-oriented deliberation toward symbolic competition between social groups.

The challenge is not the participation of religious actors in democratic politics itself. Religious participation is a legitimate component of democratic pluralism, and religious communities have historically contributed to civil society development in Indonesia (Hefner 2000). The democratic challenge emerges when digital environments encourage forms of political communication that undermine mutual recognition, intensify social divisions, or delegitimize democratic opponents through identity-based narratives.

This distinction is important because digital religious authority contains both democratic potential and democratic risks. On one hand, digital platforms allow broader participation in religious and political discussions. Individuals who previously lacked access to traditional religious institutions can now contribute to public debates and engage with diverse perspectives.

This decentralization can strengthen democratic inclusion by expanding the number of voices participating in public discourse.

On the other hand, decentralized authority also creates challenges concerning accountability and expertise. Traditional religious institutions often contain mechanisms of evaluation, education, and social accountability. Digital influencers may operate without comparable institutional constraints, meaning that their authority depends heavily on audience trust and platform popularity. Bunt (2018) notes that cyber-Islamic environments create new opportunities for religious engagement but also complicate traditional mechanisms through which religious knowledge is assessed and validated.

This challenge becomes particularly significant when religious authority intersects with political influence. Unlike formal political actors, digital religious influencers may influence political attitudes without being subject to the same accountability mechanisms as elected officials or political organizations. Their ability to shape public opinion raises questions regarding responsibility, transparency, and ethical communication within democratic societies.

The governance challenge is further complicated by the difficulty of regulating digital religious expression. States face a delicate balance between addressing harmful online content and protecting freedom of religion and expression. Excessive regulation may restrict legitimate religious and political participation, while insufficient regulation may allow misinformation, hate speech, and identity-based mobilization to undermine democratic stability. This dilemma reflects broader debates regarding digital governance, where governments must navigate tensions between security, regulation, and individual rights (Kaye 2019).

Indonesia's experience demonstrates the complexity of governing digital religious spaces within a democratic framework. Regulatory approaches focused exclusively on controlling content may be insufficient because digital religious influence emerges from broader social, technological, and political dynamics. Effective

governance requires a multi-dimensional approach involving digital literacy, platform accountability, transparency mechanisms, and civic education.

Digital literacy is particularly important because democratic resilience in digital societies depends not only on institutional regulation but also on citizens' capacity to critically evaluate information. Media literacy enables individuals to distinguish between credible religious knowledge, political persuasion, misinformation, and manipulative communication strategies. In this sense, strengthening digital literacy represents a democratic strategy that empowers citizens rather than simply restricting communication.

Platform governance also represents an increasingly important dimension of democratic regulation. Since algorithmic systems influence the visibility of religious and political narratives, platforms cannot be considered neutral intermediaries. Their design choices affect public discourse by determining patterns of amplification and engagement. As Gillespie (2014) demonstrates, algorithmic systems contain embedded assumptions and priorities that shape social interaction. Therefore, transparent platform governance is necessary to ensure that digital public spaces support democratic communication.

However, platform governance should avoid approaches that unintentionally marginalize religious expression. Religious freedom remains a fundamental democratic principle, and digital spaces have become important venues for religious communities to express identity and participate in public discussions. The objective of democratic governance should therefore not be the removal of religious voices from digital spaces, but the creation of conditions where diverse religious perspectives can participate without undermining democratic pluralism.

The Indonesian case contributes to broader debates concerning the future of religion and democracy in the digital age. It demonstrates that digitalization does not simply weaken traditional authority structures; rather, it reorganizes the processes

through which authority is constructed, legitimized, and contested. Digital religious influencers represent a new form of political-religious actor whose influence emerges from the interaction between religious credibility, technological visibility, and audience networks.

From a theoretical perspective, this article argues that digital religious authority should be understood as a form of algorithmically mediated political authority. This concept highlights that contemporary religious influence is produced through the interaction of three elements: religious legitimacy, communicative capacity, and technological infrastructure. Religious influencers gain political significance not only because of what they say but because digital systems determine how widely their messages circulate and how audiences interact with them.

This framework extends existing studies of digital religion by demonstrating that online religious authority has consequences beyond religious practice. It influences political communication, democratic participation, and public debates concerning identity and citizenship. Similarly, it extends political communication research by showing that religious authority remains an important source of political meaning in digital societies.

Ultimately, the future of Indonesia's digital Islamic public sphere will depend on whether digital transformation strengthens democratic inclusion or contributes to fragmentation and polarization. Digital religious influencers will likely remain important actors in shaping political discourse, but their democratic impact will depend on the institutional and technological environments in which they operate. Ensuring that digital religious authority contributes positively to democracy requires a balanced approach combining freedom, accountability, technological transparency, and civic capacity.

V. CONCLUSION

This article has examined how digital religious influencers reshape political authority, democratic participation, and religious communication in contemporary Indonesia. By examining the intersection between digital religion, political communication, and democratic governance, the study demonstrates that digital platforms have fundamentally transformed the mechanisms through which religious authority is produced, circulated, and legitimized. Rather than replacing traditional Islamic institutions, digital religious influencers represent a new layer of authority that operates through networked communication, personal visibility, and algorithmic mediation.

The findings indicate that the transformation of religious authority in Indonesia is characterized by a shift from institutional legitimacy toward digitally mediated legitimacy. Traditional religious organizations continue to play important roles in shaping Islamic discourse and democratic engagement; however, digital platforms have enabled new actors to participate in religious interpretation and political communication beyond conventional institutional boundaries. The authority of digital religious influencers is constructed through a combination of religious narratives, communicative performance, audience engagement, and technological visibility. This transformation demonstrates that contemporary religious authority is increasingly shaped by the interaction between social legitimacy and digital infrastructures.

The study further reveals that digital religious influencers have become significant actors within Indonesia's democratic landscape because they influence how political issues are interpreted and debated. Through religious framing, identity construction, and network-based mobilization, these actors contribute to the formation of political preferences and public opinion. Their influence does not primarily derive from formal political positions but from their ability to shape meanings, construct narratives, and mobilize communities through digital

communication networks. In this sense, digital religious influencers represent a new form of political authority that operates through symbolic and communicative power.

However, the expansion of digital religious authority also creates important challenges for democratic governance. Algorithmic systems influence which religious and political narratives gain visibility, often rewarding content characterized by emotional intensity, controversy, and high engagement. These dynamics may contribute to political polarization, misinformation, and fragmented public discourse. The Indonesian case demonstrates that digitalization creates a dual transformation: it expands democratic participation by enabling broader engagement while simultaneously generating new vulnerabilities for democratic deliberation.

Theoretically, this article contributes to existing scholarship by proposing the concept of algorithmically mediated religious authority as a framework for understanding the transformation of religion and politics in digital societies. This concept highlights that contemporary authority is no longer produced solely through institutional recognition or theological expertise but also through technological systems that shape visibility, interaction, and influence. By integrating perspectives from digital religion studies and political communication research, the study extends existing approaches that have often examined religious authority and political participation separately.

Empirically, the Indonesian case provides important insights for comparative research on religion and democracy in the Global South. Indonesia demonstrates that digital transformation does not simply secularize political communication or weaken religious influence. Instead, digitalization reorganizes religious authority and creates new forms of political participation. Similar processes are likely to occur in other Muslim-majority democracies where religious identity, democratic competition, and digital expansion intersect.

From a governance perspective, the findings suggest that managing digital religious spaces requires a balanced approach that protects freedom of religion and expression while addressing challenges related to misinformation, polarization, and harmful content. Regulatory strategies focused solely on controlling information are unlikely to address the structural causes of digital polarization. Instead, democratic governance requires strengthening digital literacy, improving platform transparency, encouraging responsible online communication, and promoting inclusive civic engagement.

Ultimately, the future of Indonesia's digital Islamic public sphere will depend on whether digital religious authority develops toward greater democratic inclusion or deeper social fragmentation. Digital religious influencers will remain important actors in shaping political and religious discourse, but their democratic impact will depend on the institutional, technological, and social environments in which they operate. The Indonesian experience demonstrates that democracy in the digital age requires not only free participation but also the capacity to ensure that new forms of authority contribute to pluralism, accountability, and meaningful democratic deliberation.

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