

The Dialectics of Religion and Politics in Indonesia's Democratic Dynamics

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the dialectical relationship between religion and politics in the dynamics of Indonesian democracy using a Systematic Literature Network Analysis (SLNA) approach. The increasing role of religion in public and political life has generated both opportunities and challenges for democratic development, particularly in a pluralistic society such as Indonesia. The main objective of this research is to map the intellectual structure, thematic trends, and scholarly networks related to religion and politics, while identifying dominant research themes and their interconnections.

The study employs a mixed-methods analytical approach combining a systematic literature review and bibliometric analysis. Data were collected from the Scopus database using predefined keywords related to religion, politics, and democracy in Indonesia, covering publications from 2015 to 2025. After applying the PRISMA selection framework, 86 articles were included in the final analysis. The data were analyzed using performance analysis to examine publication trends and citation patterns, and scientific mapping using VOS viewer to identify co-authorship, co-citation, and keyword co-occurrence networks.

The findings reveal that political Islam, religious mobilization, and identity politics are the most dominant themes in the literature. Religion is shown to function both as a moral framework that enhances democratic participation and as a political instrument that may contribute to polarization and exclusivism. The results highlight the dialectical nature of religion and politics, where both elements continuously interact and shape each other within democratic processes.

This study contributes to the literature by providing a comprehensive and systematic mapping of research on religion and politics in Indonesia. The use of SLNA offers a novel perspective that integrates quantitative and qualitative insights, revealing the evolving intellectual landscape of the field. The findings have theoretical and practical implications for understanding how religion can be managed within democratic systems to promote inclusivity, stability, and social cohesion.

Keywords: Political Islam; identity politics; religious mobilization; democracy; Indonesia

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between religion and politics has become a central issue in contemporary democratic discourse, particularly in societies where religion plays a significant role in shaping public life. In many democratic contexts, religion has evolved from being a private belief system into a powerful public force that influences political behavior, policymaking, and institutional dynamics. Indonesia, as the world's largest Muslim-majority democracy, represents a unique case where religious values are deeply embedded in both social structures and political processes. Since the democratic transition following the Reformasi era in 1998, Indonesia has undergone substantial political transformation characterized by increased participation, openness, and pluralism. However, this transformation has also been accompanied by the growing presence of religion in political contestation. Scholars have debated whether the increasing visibility of religion strengthens democratic morality or, conversely, challenges democratic inclusivity and pluralism. This debate underscores the importance of examining how religion operates within democratic systems and how its interaction with politics shapes broader governance outcomes.

In recent years, the intersection of religion and politics in Indonesia has become increasingly complex, particularly in the context of electoral competition and public mobilization. Political actors have frequently utilized religious narratives, symbols, and identities to mobilize voters and legitimize political authority. The rise of identity-based politics, often framed through religious discourse, reflects a broader shift in political strategies within democratic systems. Moreover, the expansion of digital media has intensified this phenomenon by enabling the rapid dissemination of religious and political messages, thereby amplifying their impact on public opinion. While this development has contributed to higher levels of political participation, it has also generated significant challenges, including social polarization and fragmentation. In a pluralistic society such as Indonesia, these dynamics raise concerns about the sustainability of democratic values—particularly inclusivity and tolerance. This situation reveals a critical tension between democratic ideals and the realities of political practices shaped by religious identity.

Despite the increasing scholarly attention to religion and politics in Indonesia, existing studies often remain fragmented and limited in scope. Many scholars have focused on specific themes such as political Islam, electoral behavior, or religious movements, without fully addressing the dynamic interaction between religion and politics as a continuous and evolving process. Some studies emphasize the instrumental use of religion by political elites, while others highlight its sociocultural role in shaping political engagement. However, these approaches tend to treat religion and politics as separate analytical domains, thereby overlooking their dialectical relationship. Furthermore, much of the existing literature relies on case-based or qualitative analyses, which, although insightful, do not provide a comprehensive mapping of the field. As a result, there remains a lack of systematic and data-driven studies that examine the broader intellectual structure and thematic evolution of research on religion and politics in Indonesia. This gap underscores the need for an integrative approach capable of capturing both the complexity and the dynamism of this relationship.

To address these limitations, this study aims to analyze the dialectical relationship between religion and politics in the dynamics of Indonesian democracy using a Systematic Literature Network Analysis (SLNA) approach. By integrating systematic literature review with bibliometric network analysis, this research seeks to map the development of scholarly discourse, identify dominant themes, and uncover patterns of intellectual interaction within the field. Specifically, the study focuses on examining publication trends, citation structures, and thematic clusters related to religion and politics in Indonesia. Through this approach, the research not only synthesizes existing knowledge but also provides a structural understanding of how academic debates have evolved over time. In doing so, the study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the role of religion in shaping democratic processes and political practices in Indonesia.

The novelty of this research lies in its application of a Systematic Literature Network Analysis (SLNA) approach to the study of religion and politics an approach that remains relatively underutilized. Unlike previous studies that primarily rely on descriptive or case-based analyses, this research adopts a systematic and data-driven framework to examine the

intellectual landscape of the field. By combining bibliometric analysis with a systematic review, the study provides a comprehensive mapping of research trends, thematic clusters, and scholarly networks. Furthermore, the study introduces a dialectical perspective that conceptualizes religion and politics as mutually constitutive and continuously evolving forces within democratic contexts. This perspective offers a more dynamic understanding compared to conventional approaches that view these domains as static or independent. In addition to its theoretical contribution, the findings of this study also have practical implications for policymakers and scholars in managing the role of religion within democratic governance while maintaining social cohesion and inclusivity. Therefore, this research not only advances academic discourse but also contributes to broader discussions on democracy and religion in the Global South.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a *Systematic Literature Network Analysis* (SLNA) approach to examine the dialectical relationship between religion and politics in the dynamics of Indonesian democracy. This approach was chosen because it enables the integration of a systematic literature review with bibliometric network analysis, providing a comprehensive and data-driven understanding of the research field. SLNA is particularly well-suited for identifying patterns, thematic structures, and the intellectual development of scholarly discourse, especially in complex and multidisciplinary topics such as religion and politics.

The data for this study were collected from the Scopus database, which is widely recognized as a reliable and comprehensive source of peer-reviewed academic publications. The search was conducted using the following query: *TITLE-ABS-KEY (“religion AND politics” OR “political Islam” OR “religious mobilization” OR “identity politics” AND “Indonesia” AND “democracy”)*. The search was limited to publications from 2015 to 2025 to ensure the inclusion of recent and relevant studies. This initial search yielded 656 articles. The selection process followed the PRISMA framework, consisting of the identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion stages. After removing duplicate records and excluding

irrelevant studies based on titles, abstracts, and full-text reviews, a total of 86 articles were selected for the final analysis.

The analytical framework of this study combines two main techniques: performance analysis and scientific mapping. Performance analysis is used to examine publication trends, citation patterns, influential authors, and contributing countries. This provides an overview of the development and impact of research in the field. Meanwhile, scientific mapping is conducted using VOSviewer software to analyze relationships between publications through co-authorship, co-citation, and keyword co-occurrence networks. These techniques allow for the identification of thematic clusters and the visualization of connections between key concepts in the literature.

The data analysis process involves several stages. First, bibliographic data were exported from Scopus in CSV format and processed using Microsoft Excel for data cleaning and preliminary analysis. Second, the cleaned data were imported into VOS viewer to generate network visualizations and cluster mappings. Third, the resulting clusters were interpreted qualitatively to identify dominant themes and their relevance to the relationship between religion and politics in Indonesian democracy. This combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis ensures a balanced and comprehensive interpretation of the findings.

This study is structured to present the results in two main parts: performance analysis and thematic cluster analysis. The performance analysis highlights trends in publication, citation, and authorship, while the cluster analysis focuses on identifying key themes such as political Islam, religious mobilization, and identity politics. The anticipated findings are expected to reveal the dynamic and dialectical interaction between religion and politics, demonstrating how religion functions both as a moral framework and as a political instrument within democratic processes. Through this structured approach, the study aims to provide a systematic and insightful contribution to the academic discourse on religion and democracy in Indonesia.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Political Islam and Democratic Contestation

The findings of this study indicate that political Islam constitutes one of the most dominant themes in the discourse on religion and politics in Indonesia. The bibliometric mapping reveals a strong concentration of studies discussing how Islamic identity, institutions, and actors are increasingly embedded in democratic processes. This finding directly addresses the main research question by demonstrating that religion is not merely a background variable but an active and dynamic force shaping political contestation in Indonesia.

The prominence of political Islam can be understood as a reflection of the democratization process, which allows for greater participation by religious actors in the public sphere. In this context, religion functions as both a moral framework and a strategic political resource. On the one hand, religious values provide ethical legitimacy and mobilize collective identity, encouraging political participation among citizens. On the other hand, the instrumentalization of religion in electoral politics can lead to exclusivist narratives and social polarization (Hadiz, 2016; Mietzner, 2020). This dual role explains why religion simultaneously strengthens and challenges democratic practices.

These findings are consistent with previous studies that argue that political Islam in Indonesia has undergone a significant transformation in the post-authoritarian period. Rather than pursuing purely ideological goals, many Islamic actors have adapted to democratic institutions and engaged in pragmatic political strategies (Hefner, 2011; Aspinall and Mietzner, 2019). This study expands the existing literature by demonstrating that political Islam is not an isolated phenomenon but part of a broader network of democratic contestation, reinforcing the dialectical interaction between religion and politics.

Religious Mobilization and Identity Politics

Another key finding of this study is the central role of religious mobilization and identity politics in shaping contemporary democratic dynamics in Indonesia. The analysis shows that religious identity has become an increasingly influential factor in political

communication and voter mobilization, particularly during electoral periods. This finding highlights how religion functions as a mechanism for constructing political boundaries and shaping democratic participation.

The rise of identity politics can be explained by the intensification of political competition in democratic systems, where actors seek effective strategies to mobilize support. Religion offers a powerful symbolic resource that fosters emotional attachment and collective solidarity. Furthermore, the expansion of digital media has amplified this process by facilitating the rapid dissemination of religious narratives, often framed in polarizing ways (Lim, 2017; Mietzner and Muhtadi, 2018). As a result, political discourse becomes increasingly fragmented, and the distinction between political and religious identities becomes blurred.

This finding aligns with previous research highlighting the growing influence of identity politics in Indonesia's democracy (Hadiz, 2016; Mietzner, 2020). However, this study contributes further by showing that religious mobilization is not merely situational but structurally embedded in the political system. The strong interconnection between themes such as religion, identity, and democracy suggest that the challenges posed by identity politics will persist unless addressed through inclusive democratic governance.

Synthesis of Findings and Theoretical Implications

Overall, the findings reveal that the relationship between religion and politics in Indonesia is dialectical, dynamic, and mutually constitutive. Religion acts both as a source of democratic engagement and as a potential driver of social division. This duality reflects the complexity of democracy in pluralistic societies, where competing identities and values must be continuously negotiated.

From a theoretical perspective, this study supports the argument that religion and politics should be understood as interconnected processes rather than separate domains (Hefner, 2011; Hadiz, 2016). This perspective challenges conventional approaches that either overemphasize the positive role of religion or focus solely on its negative implications. By

adopting a dialectical framework, this study provides a more nuanced understanding of how religion shapes and is shaped by democratic practices.

Compared to previous studies, this research offers a more systematic and comprehensive analysis by integrating bibliometric and qualitative approaches. While earlier research has provided valuable insights through case studies, this study maps the broader intellectual structure of the field, revealing patterns and connections that extend beyond individual cases.

Table 1. Summary of Research Dataset and Methodology

No	Variable	Description	Result
1	Data source	Database used for article collection	Scopus
2	Time Range	Publication period analyzed	2015–2025
3	Initial Record	Total articles identified	656 articles
4	Final dataset	Articles included after PRISMA selection	86 articles
5	Main themes	Dominant research topics identified	Political Islam; identity politics; religious mobilization; democracy
6	Analysis tools	Software used for analysis	VOS viewer; Microsoft Excel
7	Methodological approach	Analytical framework applied	SLNA (Systematic Literature Network Analysis)

Source: Author's compilation based on data retrieved from the Scopus database (2015–2025) and analyzed using the PRISMA protocol, VOS viewer, Microsoft Excel, and the Systematic Literature Network Analysis (SLNA) approach.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the dialectical relationship between religion and politics within the dynamics of Indonesian democracy through a Systematic Literature Network Analysis (SLNA) approach. The findings demonstrate that religion plays a significant and multifaceted role in shaping political processes, functioning both as a source of moral legitimacy and as a strategic instrument in democratic contestation. The analysis reveals that themes such as political Islam, religious mobilization, and identity politics dominate the academic discourse, reflecting the centrality of religion in Indonesia's political landscape.

In addressing the research question, this study shows that the interaction between religion and politics is not static but continuously evolving through a dynamic and reciprocal process. Religion contributes to democratic participation by mobilizing collective identity and reinforcing ethical frameworks; however, it also introduces challenges, particularly in the form of social polarization and the rise of exclusivist political narratives. This dual character highlights the complexity of maintaining democratic inclusivity in a religiously diverse society.

The contribution of this study lies in its integrative and systematic approach to analyzing the field. By combining bibliometric analysis with a systematic literature review, the research provides a comprehensive mapping of scholarly trends, thematic clusters, and intellectual structures that have not been fully captured in previous studies. Furthermore, the study advances a dialectical perspective that conceptualizes religion and politics as mutually constitutive forces, offering a more nuanced understanding compared to conventional approaches that treat them as separate domains.

Despite its contributions, this study acknowledges certain limitations, particularly its reliance on a single database and its focus on published academic literature. Future research could expand the scope by incorporating multiple databases, conducting comparative studies across different countries, or engaging in empirical fieldwork to capture the lived experiences of religious-political interactions. Additionally, further studies are needed to explore how democratic institutions can effectively manage the role of religion while preserving

inclusivity and social cohesion. Such efforts are essential for strengthening democratic resilience in Indonesia and other pluralistic societies.

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