

Cosmetic Islamism: The Use of Religious Attributes as Vote-Winners in Image Building Politics in the Post-Trust Era

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the phenomenon of cosmetic Islamism the use of religious symbols and attributes as tools for political image-building to gain electoral support in the post-truth era. In a climate where public opinion is more influenced by emotions and visual perceptions than by objective facts, religion is often reduced to a practical political instrument through the use of religious attire, religious narratives, and close ties with religious figures. This study employs a qualitative method with a descriptive approach through media observation, documentation, and a review of the literature on identity politics, the commodification of religion, dramaturgy, and the post-truth era. The results indicate that social media plays a significant role in reinforcing the practice of cosmetic Islamism through digital algorithms that create echo chambers and accelerate the massive dissemination of religious imagery. This phenomenon turns religious symbols into effective “vote getters” for building moral legitimacy and identity-based political loyalty. The resulting impacts include the dilution of religious meaning, increased social polarization, and a decline in the quality of democracy due to the dominance of image-based politics over idea-based politics. Therefore, it is necessary to improve the public’s political literacy so that voters can be more critical in evaluating candidates based on their track records, policy platforms, and integrity rather than merely on religious symbols.

Keywords: Cosmetic Islamism; identity politics; post-truth; social media, image-building politics

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary global political landscape is currently undergoing a fundamental paradigm shift as the hegemony of the post-truth era grows stronger. In this phase, objective

truth no longer occupies a central position in the public decision-making process; its place has been taken by emotional narratives and one-sided claims that disregard facts in order to win over public perception (Loudowick et al., 2023). In Indonesia, this phenomenon takes its most explicit form through the exploitation of identity-based sentiments, in which religion is forcibly drawn from the sacred private sphere onto the profane stage of practical politics. As a result, politics is no longer viewed as an arena for the exchange of ideas regarding strategic policies, but has mutated into a grand theater for the performance of artificial identities (Budiono, 2021).

This situation has given rise to a sociopolitical anomaly that we can define as “Cosmetic Islamism.” This term refers to a political practice that systematically uses religious attributes, symbols, and rhetoric merely as a superficial veneer to construct an image of instant piety in the public eye. In this context, the use of certain attire or the citation of sacred verses taken out of context is no longer grounded in the depth of sincere faith. Instead, these elements function mechanically as instruments of theatrical image-building, in which religion is reduced to nothing more than a product label or political commodity that is massively marketed to attract voter sympathy in an increasingly competitive electoral market.

Furthermore, Cosmetic Islamism operates as a highly effective “vote getter” or vote-mining machine, particularly within societies characterized by high religiosity yet vulnerable to information manipulation. Political actors shrewdly understand that by displaying strong religious attributes, they can build a shortcut to trust and moral legitimacy without having to demonstrate actual performance or personal integrity. Religious symbols ultimately metamorphose into both a shield and a weapon in political campaigns; they are used as a shield to protect against public criticism while simultaneously serving as a tool to delegitimize political opponents through narratives of spurious morality.

The escalation of this phenomenon is further exacerbated by the logic of social media in the post-truth era, which tends to prioritize speed and virality over substantive truth. Current digital algorithms create “echo chambers” that enable the mass production of “Cosmetic Islamism” content, packaged with appealing aesthetics, and instantly disseminated across various segments of society (Futuhul & Fuad, 2020). Within these virtual

public spaces, a single photo or short video depicting a politician engaged in religious activities can shape public opinion far more persuasively than comprehensive vision and mission statements.

The long-term impact of such political practices is the dumbing down of national political discourse, which is deeply concerning for the quality of democracy. When religion is merely used as a cosmetic tool for the pursuit of power, the sacred meaning of religion itself is automatically devalued. This image-driven politics creates a society obsessed with superficial religious symbolism, yet apathetic toward crucial issues such as the rule of law and economic equality.

Therefore, a critical analysis of the mechanisms underlying “Cosmetic Islamism” has become an urgent necessity to restore the health of our democratic climate. By peeling back the layers of this deceptive political facade, it is hoped that a collective critical awareness will emerge among voters one that no longer gets trapped by visual packaging but instead dares to demand the substance and substance of every political promise made.

Theoretical Framework

The Theory of Religious Commodification

The theory of the commodification of religion posits that sacred religious values can be transformed into exchange values that hold significance in the social, economic, and political spheres. From a political perspective, religious symbols, narratives, and identities are no longer used merely as spiritual tools but are also exploited to gain public support and electoral votes. In this context, religion can be interpreted and positioned as a central political commodity capable of winning over the hearts of the public through an emotional approach in religious imagery and the use of religious figures in political campaigns. The commodification of religion occurs when religious symbols, values, and practices are used for purposes beyond their spiritual functions, including political and economic interests (Hariyanto et al., n.d)

This perspective is often heavily influenced by cultural criticism, which views life including religion in this context as something that can be incorporated into the market and

drawn into the tug-of-war for power. This commodification occurs because sacred values are reduced to practical instruments for achieving specific goals, such as political popularity. In the practice of identity politics, religion is often used as a tool for mass mobilization to gain legitimacy and public support (Febriansyah et al., 2024). In practice, religious symbols are frequently employed to establish a candidate's moral legitimacy, thereby steering the public to vote based on shared religious identity rather than solely on the candidate's qualifications or political platform.

Dramaturgical Theory

The dramaturgical theory proposed by Erving Goffman explains that social life can be likened to a theatrical performance. In daily life, everyone acts as an actor presenting a certain image to others in order to make a good impression. Goffman divides social interaction into two parts: *the front stage* and *the backstage*. The *front stage* is the situation where a person appears in public. At this stage, individuals will maintain their demeanor, appearance, and speech to align with the image they wish to project. For example, a politician may present themselves as a religious figure through their attire, speeches, or religious activities in front of the public.

Meanwhile, the “backstage” refers to situations when a person is not in the public eye. In this setting, individuals tend to display a more authentic demeanor and are less concerned with maintaining a specific image. In the political world, the backstage can involve political strategies, negotiations of interests, or pragmatic actions unknown to the public (Longhofer & Winchester, n.d)

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative method with a descriptive approach. This method was chosen because the research focuses on understanding the phenomenon of using religious attributes in political image-building during the *post-truth* era. A qualitative approach is considered appropriate for exploring the meanings, symbols, and strategies used by political actors in constructing a religious image within society. A descriptive research design was

used to provide an overview of the phenomenon of “cosmetic Islamism” in current political practice. This study is not intended to test hypotheses but rather to explain how religious symbols and attributes are utilized as a means of garnering sympathy and political support from the public.

The data sources used consist of primary and secondary data. Primary data was obtained through observation of political activity on social media, political speeches, campaigns, and various news reports featuring the use of religious symbols. Meanwhile, secondary data was obtained from books, academic journals, articles, and previous research related to identity politics, the commodification of religion, dramaturgy, and the *post-truth* era. Data collection was conducted through media documentation and observation. Documentation involved gathering various materials, such as social media posts, campaign photos, speech videos, and political news stories relevant to the research focus. Media observation was conducted to examine how religious imagery is constructed and presented by political actors in the public sphere.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Anatomy of “Cosmetic” Islamism

The phenomenon of “cosmetic” Islamism can be understood as a tendency to use Islamic symbols that emphasize outward appearance over a deep internalization of religious values. In modern society, religion is not only positioned as a spiritual guide but also serves as a social identity displayed in the public sphere. Consequently, various religious symbols are often utilized to construct a specific image, whether for social, economic, or political purposes. One of the most common forms is the use of Islamic-style clothing as a symbol of piety. Garments such as the gamis, sharia-compliant hijab, peci, and turban are frequently worn to project a religious image in public. Over time, these items have come to be understood not only as part of religious teachings but also as elements of lifestyle and social identity. This situation reflects a shift in the meaning of religious symbols from something sacred to a component of consumer culture and the need for image-building (Farhan &

Islamiyah, 2019). Today, religious symbols have been commodified, obscured, and even exploited as marketable goods; this indicates that religious symbols are no longer merely used as a form of expressing faith but are also utilized for economic gain and the construction of a social image for the public or general audience.

In addition to clothing, the use of religious terminology is also a crucial aspect of “cosmetic Islamism.” Terms such as *hijrah*, *berkah*, *sharia*, *umat*, and Islam frequently appear in speeches, on social media, and in product promotions. The use of such religious vocabulary aims to foster an emotional connection with the Muslim community while reinforcing a religious image. In practice, religious language is often used as a symbolic communication tool to gain public sympathy and trust. This phenomenon is increasingly evident through the involvement of religious figures in various public activities. The presence of ustads, kiai, or habaib at political events, business promotions, or social media campaigns is often leveraged as a form of moral legitimacy. Religious figures are considered to have a significant influence in shaping public opinion, so their presence can enhance the positive image of a group or individual. Under certain conditions, proximity to religious figures is even emphasized more than the actual content of the program or the ideas being presented. Digital media also plays a crucial role in expanding the practice of “cosmetic Islamism.” Through social media and television, religious symbols are visually packaged to capture the public’s attention. Da’wah content, religious programs, and Islam-themed activities are often produced according to market logic and the need for popularity. As a result, religion is more often presented in visual and symbolic forms that are easily consumed by the public. The commodification of religion has the potential to shift the orientation of da’wah from a spiritual dimension toward popularity and profit (Kadafi et al., 2025). This demonstrates that digital media not only functions as a vehicle for da’wah but also serves as a space for shaping religious imagery.

Another form of cosmetic Islamism can be observed through the large-scale publicization of philanthropic activities. Activities such as providing aid to orphans, social assistance, Friday almsgiving, and humanitarian efforts are often documented and widely disseminated via social media. Generally, these activities are part of Islamic teachings that

hold positive value. However, when publicity takes precedence over the substance of social concern, philanthropic activities risk becoming tools for image-building. In this context, charitable acts are interpreted not only as acts of worship but also as a means of gaining social recognition and legitimacy (Zailani & Ulinnuha, 2023). Overall, “cosmetic Islamism” reflects a trend in how society interprets religiosity in the modern era. Piety is often represented through visual displays, the use of religious symbols, and the intensity of social media posts. This phenomenon demonstrates that religion is not merely a spiritual value system but has also become part of image-building strategies in contemporary social life.

Vote-Getter Mechanisms in the Digital Age

Advances in digital technology have brought significant changes to patterns of political communication in society. Social media is now not only used as a means of sharing information but has also become a primary space for shaping public opinion and gaining political support. In modern political practice, religious imagery is often employed as a strategy to attract voter sympathy in the digital sphere. Content featuring religious symbols or narratives generally spreads more quickly because it generates a high volume of user interactions, such as comments, likes, and reposts. This situation has led to religious issues and symbols appearing more frequently in political communication on social media. Social media platforms operate through algorithms that tailor content based on user activity. When a user frequently views or interacts with religiously tinged political content, the platform will continue to recommend similar content. As a result, users are exposed to more information that supports their own views rather than information that challenges them. This phenomenon is known as an “*echo chamber*” a situation where an individual is immersed in a homogeneous information environment, thereby reinforcing the views of a particular group (Budiyono, 2017).

The existence of *echo chambers* makes religious image-building strategies on social media increasingly effective. Content showing political figures praying, wearing Islamic attire, or attending religious events typically garners a strong response from the digital community. The more engagement a post receives, the wider its reach through social media algorithms. Thus, these algorithms indirectly help accelerate the spread of religion-based

political narratives in the digital sphere. In digital political communication, an emotional approach is often considered more effective than presenting technical policy proposals. Consequently, religious symbols are frequently used to build an emotional connection with the public. The use of terms such as “*the faithful*,” “*blessing*,” “*Islamic*,” and “*hijrah*” in social media posts is part of a strategy to construct a specific political identity. For some members of the public, religious imagery on social media is more effective at shaping perceptions than explanations of government policies or programs.

In addition to influencing political image-building, social media algorithms also contribute to rising political fanaticism. Social media users tend to join digital groups or communities that share similar views. The constant exposure to the same information reinforces individuals’ confidence in their own group’s perspectives and makes them less likely to accept differing opinions. Under these conditions, the space for public discourse narrows as people increasingly interact with groups that share their political views or ideologies (Bayu Aji & Asnawi Tohir, 2020). This phenomenon is further reinforced by the way social media algorithms prioritize user engagement over the quality of the information itself. Content that is emotional in nature and relates to religious identity typically attracts public attention more easily and thus goes viral more quickly. As a result, religious issues in politics more often dominate the digital space than rational discussions of programs or policies.

The role of political influencers and religious figures on social media also helps reinforce the mechanism of religiously-based *vote-getting*. Support given by religious figures to certain candidates can spread rapidly because it is amplified by digital platform algorithms. Religious figures are considered to have a strong moral influence, so their opinions are readily accepted by their followers. In this context, social media serves not only as a means of communication but also as an arena for the formation of political legitimacy based on religious identity (Dharmajaya & Minangkabawi, 2024). Overall, *vote-getting* mechanisms in the digital age demonstrate that social media algorithms exert a significant influence on shaping the political behavior of the public. The continuous dissemination of religious imagery through social media is capable of building identity-based political loyalty while

simultaneously reinforcing polarization within society. Thus, social media is not only a place for exchanging information but also a space that plays a role in shaping public opinion and the direction of political preferences.

Image-Based Politics and Idea-Based Politics

The development of digital media has brought about major changes to patterns of political communication in Indonesia. In recent years, political practices have increasingly emphasized image-building over substantive debates of ideas. Political actors tend to use symbols, identity, and emotional appeals to capture the public's attention. One of the most common forms of this is the use of religious sentiment in the political arena. As a result, discussions on critical issues such as the economy, the law, and the environment are often sidelined by symbolic and emotional debates over identity. Image-based politics can be understood as an effort to build a positive impression through specific visual displays and symbols without engaging in in-depth discussions of policy programs. In the context of social media, political image-building is typically carried out through the publication of religious activities, displays of closeness to religious figures, or the use of narratives that appeal to the public's emotions. Such content is more likely to capture the public's attention because it is simple, visual, and easy to understand. On the other hand, discussions of public policy are often considered less engaging because they require more complex explanations (Adnan & Mona, 2024).

Ideally, democracy fosters the development of "politics of ideas" that is, political competition focused on action plans, policy solutions, and development visions. However, the rise of social media has instead shifted political debates toward issues of identity and emotional sentiment. Religious narratives are often used to build rapport with the public while simultaneously reinforcing polarization in the public sphere. In such situations, public attention is more easily diverted from substantive issues toward symbolic identity conflicts. This phenomenon is evident in discussions of economic issues. Problems such as rising prices of basic necessities, unemployment, poverty, and social inequality often do not receive as much attention as religious issues that go viral on social media. In reality, economic problems have a direct impact on people's daily lives. However, the digital space is more often

dominated by debates about group identities, religious symbols, or specific moral claims; as a result, discussions about economic policy receive insufficient attention in public discourse (Bayu Aji & Asnawi Tohir, 2020).

The same phenomenon is evident in legal issues. Discussions on corruption, bureaucratic reform, and legal justice are often less popular than political content that capitalizes on identity-based sentiments. In the practice of digital politics, emotional and symbolic narratives are more effective at capturing attention than explanations of legal reforms, which tend to be complex. This results in the democratic sphere being dominated more by image-based competition than by the rational and solution-oriented exchange of ideas. Environmental issues also frequently face similar challenges. Issues regarding environmental degradation, climate change, pollution, and the exploitation of natural resources do not always take center stage in digital political discourse. The public is more likely to engage in debates that involve emotional and identity-based elements than in environmental issues that require data and scientific understanding. In this regard, social media algorithms help reinforce the dominance of content that generates high levels of engagement, particularly content that is controversial and provokes emotional responses from the public.

Social media has a significant influence on the rise of image-based politics because digital platforms operate based on the logic of *engagement*. Content that triggers emotions, conflict, and identity-based debates typically gains wider reach more easily than substantive policy discussions. As a result, political actors are more inclined to produce content that instantly captures public attention rather than fostering in-depth discussions about national issues.

Social media has become a new arena in modern political communication practices (Anshari, 2013). This indicates that current patterns of political communication are heavily influenced by the nature of digital media, which emphasizes the speed of information dissemination and visual appeal. Overall, the dominance of image-based politics over idea-based politics indicates a shift in the orientation of democratic practices in the digital age. Politics no longer focuses entirely on the quality of programs and policy solutions but is

increasingly influenced by symbols, identities, and emotional sentiments. As a result, important issues such as the economy, the law, and the environment often lose public attention because they are overshadowed by artificial religious debates.

The Voter Paradox

The paradox of voter behavior where voters continue to base their choices on external “packaging” even while aware of the image-building elements can be understood through the limitations of human cognitive capacity in processing complex political information. In political behavior, the public does not always act as rational actors who thoroughly examine candidates’ platforms and track records. Amid the flood of information in the post-truth era, religious attributes such as devout attire, the hijab, or participation in religious rituals serve as instant and easily recognizable visual markers. Voters use these symbols as a quick way to assess a candidate’s morality, honesty, and suitability without having to engage in complex political evaluation. Consequently, the rational awareness that these symbols may merely be part of an image-building strategy is often overshadowed by the psychological comfort provided by simple and familiar visual identities (Lestari, 2018).

In addition to cognitive efficiency, this phenomenon is also closely linked to the dynamics of social identity in Indonesian society. Religious identity serves as one of the strongest emotional anchors in electoral politics. When a political actor displays religious symbols, this is understood not only as a personal expression but also as a signal of group affinity. Although voters are aware that such attributes may be strategic for electoral gain, they are still driven to support candidates perceived as representing their collective identity. Political choices are ultimately based not solely on a rational evaluation of a candidate’s capabilities and policies, but also on an emotional impulse to maintain group solidarity and secure the representation of their identity within the sphere of power (Yunus, 2023).

This trend is further reinforced by the rise of social media, which creates “*echo chambers*” and amplifies the repetitive reproduction of political narratives. Digital algorithms tend to present content aligned with users’ preferences, thereby narrowing the space for critical dialogue. Under such conditions, voters are more likely to accept symbolic narratives that affirm their group identity than objective facts that contradict their beliefs. As

a result, religious imagery continuously produced through digital media gradually transforms into an “emotional truth” that is collectively believed. This phenomenon demonstrates that in the post-truth era, manipulating perceptions through identity symbols is often more effective in building political loyalty than presenting substantive facts and policy programs.

Impact and Implications

The Erosion of Religious Meaning

The phenomenon of using religious attributes in politics indirectly causes a shift in the meaning of religion. Religion, which should serve as a moral and ethical guide in society, is often used as a tool to build a political image. In practice, religious symbols such as Islamic attire, religious study sessions, and closeness to religious figures are frequently displayed in an exaggerated manner during political campaigns. This situation creates the impression that religion is merely being used as a “political sales tool” to win public sympathy. As a result, religious values which should be sacred appear superficial because they are only invoked at specific times, particularly in the run-up to elections. Once the political process is over, this religious image often disappears from both policy-making and everyday political behavior.

In the post-truth era, religious symbols are increasingly being used as political tools because the public is more easily influenced by emotions and identity than by objective facts. Emotionally charged religious narratives on social media can quickly shape public perception, even though they are often not accompanied by in-depth discussions of candidates’ platforms or capabilities (Kurniawan, 2018) . This phenomenon indicates that religion is gradually being commodified in modern politics. The sacred values of religion are being transformed into tools for gaining political legitimacy and support. In the long term, this situation could lead society to view religion solely as a practical political instrument, rather than as a moral guide for national and civic life.

Social Polarization in Society

The use of religious symbols in politics also has the potential to create social polarization within society. When religion is used as a political identity, society tends to divide into specific groups based on shared identities and beliefs. Differences in political

choices are ultimately no longer understood as a natural part of democracy but instead turn into identity conflicts. This phenomenon is increasingly evident in the development of social media. Many political narratives use religious sentiment to attack political opponents or to build group loyalty. As a result, the public discourse space is filled with emotional debates and identity-based fanaticism rather than rational and healthy dialogue.

Religiously-based identity politics also reinforces social divisions within Indonesia's diverse society. The use of religious issues in political contests can create tensions between groups and increase the potential for social conflict if not properly managed (Setiyaningsih, 2021). Furthermore, the rise of identity politics makes it easier for people to get trapped in an "us" versus "them" mindset. This situation can erode tolerance and weaken social unity in Indonesia's democratic life.

CONCLUSION

Based on the discussion presented, it can be concluded that the phenomenon of cosmetic Islamism is a form of image-building politics that utilizes religious symbols and attributes as tools to gain political support. In the post-truth era, the use of religious symbols has become highly effective because the public is more easily influenced by emotions, identity, and visual perceptions than by facts and candidates' policy platforms. Social media plays a significant role in reinforcing this phenomenon. Through digital platforms, religious imagery can be disseminated rapidly and on a massive scale, thereby shaping public opinion in a short period of time. As a result, modern politics no longer consists solely of a battle of ideas and policies but also a battle of images packaged in an appealing way to influence voters. This phenomenon has several consequences, such as the dilution of religious meaning, increased social polarization, and a decline in the quality of democracy. Religion, which should serve as a moral guide, risks being viewed as a tool for legitimizing power. Furthermore, society becomes more easily divided due to excessive identity politics. Thus, cosmetic Islamism can be understood as the result of a convergence between pragmatic politics, social media culture, and the characteristics of the "post-truth" era, which prioritizes image over substance.

To address this phenomenon, it is necessary to improve the public's political literacy so that voters are not easily swayed by mere symbols and image-building. The public needs to be more critical in evaluating political candidates by examining their track records, the quality of their platforms, and their genuine commitment to the public interest. Furthermore, the media plays a crucial role in fostering a healthier and more educational space for political discourse. The media should not merely amplify sensational and symbolic narratives but also focus on substantive issues related to the public's needs. For political actors, the use of religion in the public sphere should be conducted ethically and not merely as a tool for electoral gain. Healthy politics should be built through ideas, integrity, and concrete action, not just through temporary symbolic image-building.

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