



Identity Politics in Muslim Societies and the Ethical Limits of Religious Mobilization

**Nabilah Batubara^{1*}, Nazwatul Jannah Harahap², Rizky Puji Gunawan
Nasution³, Yanuardin,⁴ Ilham Hasan⁵**

¹²³⁵Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara

⁴Institut Agama Islam Daar Al-Ulum Asahan, Sumatera Utara

Email Correspondence: nabilahbatra@gmail.com

Abstract

Identity politics is a persistent feature of contemporary democratic life, yet its operation in Muslim-majority societies is analytically ambivalent. Religious identity can provide a legitimate basis for recognition, solidarity, moral advocacy, and political participation, but it can also be converted into an exclusionary boundary that intensifies polarization, intolerance, and intergroup conflict. This article examines the drivers, forms, consequences, and ethical limits of religious identity politics, with Indonesia as the principal empirical context. It employs a qualitative literature-review design. The review identifies five interconnected drivers: social cleavage, elite political mobilization, economic inequality, perceived discrimination, and digital-media amplification. These drivers are expressed through religiously framed campaigning, symbolic political representation, in-group/out-group narratives, group fanaticism, and digitally mediated mobilization. The analysis shows that the democratic effects of identity politics depend less on the presence of religious identity than on the mode of mobilization. Identity may strengthen representation and civic participation when it articulates legitimate grievances without denying equal citizenship; it becomes democratically corrosive when religious belonging is instrumentalized to delegitimize opponents or monopolize moral authority. Drawing on Islamic principles of justice, brotherhood, unity, moderation, and recognition of diversity, the article proposes a normative continuum from identity recognition to exclusionary identity mobilization.

Keywords: *Identity Politics; Religious Mobilization; Polarization.*

Abstrak: Politik identitas merupakan ciri yang terus ada dalam kehidupan demokrasi kontemporer, namun dinamikanya di masyarakat berpenduduk mayoritas Muslim memiliki sifat yang secara analitis ambivalen. Identitas keagamaan dapat menjadi landasan yang sah bagi pengakuan, solidaritas, advokasi moral, dan partisipasi politik, namun juga dapat berubah menjadi batasan eksklusif yang memperparah polarisasi, intoleransi, dan konflik antar-kelompok. Artikel ini mengkaji faktor pendorong, bentuk, konsekuensi, dan batasan etis dari politik identitas keagamaan, dengan Indonesia sebagai konteks empiris utamanya. Studi ini menggunakan desain tinjauan pustaka kualitatif. Hasil tinjauan mengidentifikasi lima faktor pendorong yang saling terkait: pembelahan sosial, mobilisasi politik oleh elite, ketimpangan ekonomi, persepsi diskriminasi, dan amplifikasi melalui media digital. Faktor-faktor ini termanifestasi dalam bentuk kampanye bernuansa agama, representasi politik simbolis, narasi perbedaan kelompok (in-group/out-group), fanatisme kelompok, serta mobilisasi berbasis media digital. Analisis menunjukkan bahwa dampak politik identitas terhadap demokrasi lebih bergantung pada pola mobilisasinya daripada sekadar keberadaan identitas keagamaan itu sendiri.

Identitas dapat memperkuat representasi dan partisipasi warga ketika ia menyuarakan aspirasi atau keluhan yang sah tanpa menafikan kesetaraan status kewarganegaraan; sebaliknya, identitas menjadi faktor yang merusak demokrasi ketika afiliasi keagamaan dimanfaatkan secara instrumental untuk mendelegitimasi lawan politik atau memonopoli otoritas moral. Dengan berpijak pada prinsip-prinsip Islam mengenai keadilan, persaudaraan, persatuan, moderasi, dan pengakuan terhadap keberagaman, artikel ini mengajukan sebuah kontinum normatif yang membentang dari pengakuan identitas hingga mobilisasi identitas yang bersifat eksklusif.

Kata Kunci: *Politik Identitas; Mobilisasi Keagamaan; Polarisasi.*

INTRODUCTION

Identity has become an increasingly visible resource in contemporary politics because political actors do not mobilize citizens solely through policy preferences or material interests. They also mobilize shared meanings, memories, religious affiliations, ethnic attachments, and moral boundaries. Research on Indonesian electoral politics demonstrates that ethnic and religious sentiments can meaningfully shape political evaluation and voting behavior, particularly when such identities become salient within competitive elections (Sumaktoyo, 2021; Widian et al., 2023). Identity politics should therefore be understood as a mode of representation and mobilization rather than as a synonym for conflict. The analytical problem begins when identity ceases to function as a claim for recognition and becomes a mechanism for excluding those defined as outsiders.

Within Indonesia's Muslim-majority society, religion occupies a particularly important political position because Islam is not experienced only as a private belief. It also provides moral language, collective symbols, organizations, religious authorities, and networks that shape public life. Studies of Islamist mobilization and competition for religious authority show that these resources can facilitate political coordination and collective action, especially when religious grievances are connected to electoral competition or claims of communal threat (Mietzner & Muhtadi, 2018; Pelletier, 2021; Barton et al., 2021). The political salience of Islam therefore cannot be read simply as evidence of religiosity; it must also be examined as a field in which religious authority, political strategy, and public legitimacy interact.

The expansion of social media has intensified this dynamic. Digital platforms allow religious and political narratives to travel rapidly across networks without the editorial filtering associated with conventional media. Lim's (2017) analysis of algorithmic enclaves shows how networked communication can reinforce tribalized political identities, while studies of Islamic clicktivism and electoral polarization demonstrate that online religious narratives can facilitate mobilization, authority formation, and antagonistic political clustering (Ahyar & Alfitri, 2019; Salahudin et al., 2020). More recent evidence from the 2024 presidential election further shows that

Muslim organizational identity continues to be actively negotiated and contested through social media discourse (Marijan et al., 2025). Digital communication does not create identity politics by itself, but it can accelerate its reach, repetition, and emotional intensity.

The literature reveals a genuine democratic ambivalence. Religious identity can organize representation, political participation, and collective advocacy, yet it can also contribute to democratic deconsolidation, polarization, intolerance, and unequal citizenship when mobilization depends on exclusionary boundaries (Mietzner, 2018; Jati, 2022; Simandjuntak, 2021). Studies of Indonesian religious tolerance also caution against treating Muslim organizations or constituencies as uniformly pluralist or intolerant; attitudes and practices vary across institutional settings and political contexts (Mietzner & Muhtadi, 2020; Budiatri, 2025). The central analytical task is therefore to identify the threshold at which legitimate identity-based political expression becomes exclusionary mobilization.

This boundary is especially important from an Islamic ethical perspective. The Qur'anic recognition of human diversity in Qur'an 49:13 treats difference as a condition for mutual recognition rather than domination. Other normative principles emphasize justice (Qur'an 16:90), brotherhood and reconciliation (49:10), collective unity (3:103), and moderation (2:143). These principles do not remove politics from Muslim life, nor do they prohibit political organization around moral or communal concerns. They instead establish ethical limits: religious identity should not be deployed in ways that normalize injustice, dehumanize opponents, or transform political competition into permanent social hostility.

The main gap addressed in this article is conceptual. Existing scholarship has developed strong but partly separate explanations of Islamist mobilization, electoral religious framing, social-media polarization, religious intolerance, and the conservative turn in Indonesian democracy (Mietzner & Muhtadi, 2018; Salahudin et al., 2020; Jati, 2024; Qodir, 2025). What is less clearly integrated is a framework for explaining how the same religious identity can produce democratic inclusion in one context and exclusion in another. Without such a framework, identity politics risks being treated either as automatically legitimate because it reflects religious solidarity or automatically dangerous because it mobilizes group difference.

This article asks: under what conditions does religious identity function as a legitimate form of democratic representation, and when does it become exclusionary identity politics in a Muslim-majority democratic setting? The study has three objectives. First, it identifies the principal social, political, economic, and digital drivers of identity politics. Second, it analyzes the forms and democratic consequences of religious identity mobilization in Indonesia, while drawing limited comparative implications for Muslim-majority societies. Third, it develops a normative-analytical continuum grounded in Islamic

political ethics to distinguish identity recognition, identity-based representation, competitive mobilization, and exclusionary identity politics. This contribution reframes the debate from whether identity should appear in politics to how identity can be politically articulated without undermining justice, equal citizenship, and social cohesion.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative literature-review design with a descriptive-analytical orientation. This design is appropriate because the research question concerns the interpretation of concepts, arguments, empirical patterns, and normative principles rather than the estimation of individual-level causal effects. Empirical and conceptual publications are treated as secondary literature, while Qur'anic verses are used separately as normative Islamic sources for ethical interpretation. The study does not claim to be a systematic review in the PRISMA sense because it does not employ a prospectively registered protocol, exhaustive database coverage, or a formal screening flow. Its contribution is an interpretive synthesis supported by a deliberately strengthened and validated scholarly corpus.

The literature corpus was expanded through targeted scholarly searches and then checked for bibliographic validity through recognized journal and indexing gateways.

Analysis proceeded in three stages. First, the validated literature was coded thematically into recurring categories: social cleavage, political competition, economic inequality, discrimination, digital-media amplification, religious campaigning, symbolic politics, religious authority, group fanaticism, solidarity, participation, polarization, intolerance, citizenship, and Islamic ethical limits. Second, these categories were compared to identify relationships between the conditions that activate identity, the political practices through which identity is mobilized, and the consequences produced in democratic life. Third, the findings were synthesized into an analytical continuum that distinguishes constructive identity recognition from exclusionary identity mobilization. The continuum is therefore an interpretive model derived from recurring patterns in the literature rather than a claim that every case follows a fixed sequence.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Identity Politics as Recognition, Representation, and Boundary-Making

Identity politics begins with a basic political fact: citizens enter public life with social identities that shape how they interpret interests, injustice, and belonging. Empirical research on the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election demonstrates that religious and ethnic sentiments can become politically consequential without being reducible to a single deterministic effect (Sumaktoyo, 2021). Research on Indonesian elections likewise shows how

religious narratives can be deliberately incorporated into populist political strategies (Widian et al., 2023). These findings support a relational definition of identity politics: identity matters politically when it is activated to define who is represented, what interests are prioritized, and which claims are treated as morally urgent.

In Indonesia's Muslim public sphere, religious identity is especially salient because it links personal belief to communal institutions, religious authority, and public morality. Mosques, clerics, Islamic organizations, activist networks, and religious narratives can generate trust and coordination, but they are also sites of competition over who is entitled to speak for Islam (Pelletier, 2021; Barton et al., 2021). Research on Nahdlatul Ulama further shows that tolerance is institutionally and socially dynamic rather than automatic, varying across contexts and constituencies (Budiatri, 2025). The critical issue is therefore not the presence of religion in politics, but the way religious authority and identity are translated into public claims while recognizing citizens who do not share the same political or theological position.

Identity politics becomes more exclusionary when political belonging is defined through a rigid distinction between an in-group and an out-group. Digital and electoral studies in Indonesia show how religiously coded narratives can simplify political competition into morally polarized camps and strengthen mutually reinforcing identity enclaves (Lim, 2017; Salahudin et al., 2020; Jati, 2022). Under these conditions, religious identity is no longer simply a source of representation; it becomes a criterion for determining who is morally legitimate, authentically national, or politically trustworthy. The shift matters because criticism of a candidate or movement can then be reframed as hostility toward a religious community, weakening democratic accountability.

The distinction between recognition and boundary-making provides the first analytical insight of this review. Not every public use of Muslim identity should be categorized as divisive identity politics. Claims for protection from discrimination or equal recognition can perform a democratic function, particularly where citizenship rights are unevenly distributed (Nalle, 2021; Simandjuntak, 2021). The democratic risk emerges when identity is used to deny equal citizenship, portray opponents as existential threats, or close political discussion through claims of exclusive moral authority. This distinction prepares the analysis of the conditions that push identity from representation toward polarization.

Why Identity Politics Emerges: Interacting Social, Political, Economic, and Digital Drivers

The first driver is social differentiation. Plural societies contain multiple religious, ethnic, organizational, and cultural communities, but

diversity becomes politically polarizing only when these differences are connected to unequal recognition, competition, or narratives of threat. Sumaktoyo (2021) shows that religious and ethnic sentiments can independently structure electoral judgment, while Jati (2022) identifies identity-based social cleavages as an important component of Indonesia's recent polarization. Shared identity therefore provides a ready vocabulary for solidarity, but social diversity itself is not the cause of conflict. Polarization arises when diversity is reorganized into antagonistic political boundaries.

The second driver is elite political strategy. Democratic competition creates incentives to mobilize voters through symbols that are emotionally resonant and easily recognized. Research on the 2016 Islamist mobilization and subsequent electoral politics shows how grievances, religious organizations, and elite accommodation can interact with campaign strategies (Mietzner & Muhtadi, 2018; Mietzner, 2018). Widian et al. (2023) further demonstrate that Islamic narratives have been operationalized within populist electoral strategy, while Jati (2024) highlights the continuing analytical importance of Islamic populism in Indonesia. Religious solidarity becomes democratically problematic when identity cues substitute for scrutiny of competence, policy, accountability, and institutional performance.

The third driver is economic inequality and perceived injustice. Material grievances do not mechanically produce religious identity politics, but scholarship on Islamic populism has repeatedly debated how socioeconomic discontent, political distrust, and cultural identity become connected within mobilizing narratives (Jati, 2024; Basya & Hamka, 2023). Identity can translate diffuse frustration into a story of communal exclusion by identifying who is perceived to benefit and who is perceived to lose. The analytical implication is that religious polarization cannot be reduced to theology: unresolved inequality and distrust can provide the grievances through which identity-based political narratives acquire credibility.

The fourth driver is discrimination or marginalization. Groups that experience unequal treatment may organize around religious identity to demand recognition, legal protection, and political rights. Indonesian scholarship on segregated citizenship and laws affecting indigenous-belief communities demonstrates that religious classification can be embedded in institutions and can shape access to equal citizenship (Simandjuntak, 2021; Nalle, 2021). Such mobilization can therefore have a legitimate democratic function when it exposes exclusion. It becomes polarizing when specific grievances are generalized into hostility toward whole communities or used to justify reciprocal discrimination.

The fifth driver is digital-media amplification. Social media lowers the cost of producing and distributing identity narratives, allowing political messages to circulate rapidly across informal networks. Lim (2017) explains how algorithmic enclaves can reinforce tribalized identities, while Salahudin

et al. (2020) document Islamic political polarization on social media during the 2019 presidential election. Digital Islamic activism can also generate new forms of religious authority and collective action (Ahyar & Alfitri, 2019). Most recently, Marijan et al. (2025) show how Nahdliyyin identity was discursively contested on social media during the 2024 presidential election. Digital platforms therefore amplify pre-existing tensions by increasing visibility, repetition, and emotional immediacy rather than independently causing polarization.

These five drivers are best understood as interacting rather than independent. Social cleavages provide categories of belonging; political actors frame those categories; inequality and discrimination supply grievances; and digital media accelerate circulation. Identity politics becomes particularly intense when these conditions converge. This interaction explains why similar religious identities can remain politically moderate in one setting but become polarizing in another. The next section therefore examines the concrete forms through which these drivers are translated into political practice.

Forms of Religious Identity Mobilization in Muslim-Majority Indonesia

Religiously framed campaigning is one of the most visible forms of identity politics. Candidates may use religious terminology, seek endorsement from clerics, attend religious events, or present themselves as guardians of Muslim interests. Research on Indonesian elections shows that religious narratives can be strategically incorporated into populist campaigning, while the 2016 Islamist mobilization illustrates how religious grievances, organizations, and political opportunity can converge (Widian et al., 2023; Mietzner & Muhtadi, 2018). Such practices are not automatically illegitimate because political actors routinely communicate through culturally meaningful symbols. The democratic concern arises when religious symbolism implies that only one candidate or coalition represents authentic faith, thereby converting electoral choice into a test of religious loyalty.

A second form is symbolic political representation. Religious clothing, scriptural references, slogans, clerical proximity, and public rituals may communicate identification with Muslim constituencies. The literature on Islamic populism and electoral strategy shows that symbols can help construct a moralized political 'people' and distinguish it from perceived adversaries (Mietzner, 2018; Jati, 2024; Widian et al., 2023). Symbolic representation can strengthen recognition when it makes a community visible within public institutions. Yet it becomes manipulative when symbolism is detached from substantive commitments to justice, accountability, and social welfare. The analytical task is therefore to separate the communicative function of religious symbols from assumptions about the ethical quality of those who deploy them.

A third form is polarization between Muslim groups. Political disagreement may overlap with differences in organization, school of thought,

religious authority, or interpretation, producing camps that define one another through mutually exclusive labels. Studies of Indonesian social-media politics show that such divisions can be reproduced through online networks, while research on NU illustrates that internal Muslim constituencies themselves contain changing and sometimes inconsistent orientations toward tolerance (Salahudin et al., 2020; Mietzner & Muhtadi, 2020; Budiatri, 2025). In this configuration, intra-Muslim diversity becomes a political cleavage rather than an intellectual or organizational difference. The political cost is a narrowing of the space for disagreement within a shared religious community.

A fourth form is group fanaticism, or an exclusionary form of *ashabiyah*. Fanaticism appears when loyalty to the group overrides impartial judgment and when moral evaluation depends primarily on whether an actor belongs to 'us' or 'them.' Research on militant Islamist mobilization and intolerance shows how strong organizational identity can be connected to exclusionary attitudes and coercive political repertoires under particular conditions (Facal, 2020; Mietzner & Muhtadi, 2018). The problem is not strong commitment to a community; democratic life depends on collective attachments. The problem is unconditional loyalty that suspends ethical standards for insiders while intensifying them for opponents.

A fifth form is digitally mediated mobilization. Online campaigns, hashtags, short videos, religious commentary, and networked calls for collective action can rapidly organize Muslim publics around political issues. Studies of Islamic clicktivism demonstrate that digital platforms can facilitate activist coordination and reshape religious authority, while studies of electoral polarization show that the same infrastructure can intensify antagonistic clustering (Ahyar & Alfitri, 2019; Salahudin et al., 2020). The 2024 election provides a more recent example of Islamic organizational identity being actively negotiated through social-media discourse (Marijan et al., 2025). Digital mobilization is therefore structurally ambivalent: it can expand participation or intensify exclusion depending on the content, incentives, and norms governing its use.

Democratic Ambivalence: Solidarity and Participation versus Polarization and Intolerance

The positive effects of identity politics begin with solidarity. Shared religious identity can generate trust, collective action, charitable networks, and a vocabulary through which public grievances are articulated. Studies of Islamic movements and digital activism demonstrate that religious identity can sustain organizational capacity and political participation rather than functioning only as a source of conflict (Ahyar & Alfitri, 2019; Barton et al., 2021). At the same time, Budiatri (2025) shows that tolerance within major Muslim constituencies is dynamic and context-dependent. Identity can

therefore function as a democratic resource when solidarity connects citizens to public life without demanding the exclusion of other groups.

Political participation is a second potential benefit. Identity-based networks can motivate citizens who might otherwise remain disengaged from formal politics by distributing information, framing grievances, and creating channels for collective advocacy. Research on Islamist mobilization and electoral religious strategy confirms that religious networks can meaningfully shape participation and political behavior (Mietzner & Muhtadi, 2018; Widian et al., 2023). Participation, however, should not be treated as sufficient evidence of democratic quality. Mobilization can increase political engagement while simultaneously reducing tolerance or policy-based judgment. The relevant question is not only whether identity activates participation, but what kind of relationship that participation produces among citizens.

The negative side becomes visible when identity hardens into polarization. Polarization divides citizens into opposing camps that interpret disagreement as evidence of moral or social incompatibility. Research on Indonesia's democratic deconsolidation and recent conservative turn identifies religious polarization as a significant challenge to plural democratic competition (Mietzner, 2018; Jati, 2022; Qodir, 2025). In Muslim political settings, electoral preference can then become entangled with allegations about faith, piety, or communal loyalty. This framing raises the social cost of compromise because accommodation can be interpreted as betrayal rather than as a normal practice of democratic politics.

Intolerance represents a further consequence. When political actors claim exclusive ownership of religious truth, they can restrict the legitimacy of different interpretations and transform theological boundaries into civic hierarchies. Research on Islamist mobilization, the Islamic Defenders Front, religious nationalism, and NU's politics of tolerance shows that exclusion and tolerance are shaped by both organizational practice and political context (Mietzner & Muhtadi, 2018; Facal, 2020; Simandjuntak, 2021; Mietzner & Muhtadi, 2020). This becomes a democratic problem when state authority, public rights, or social acceptance are distributed according to religious identity. Minority groups and dissenting Muslims are especially vulnerable because political membership becomes conditional on conformity to dominant identity narratives.

Hate speech and digitally amplified hostility deepen these risks. Identity-based messages are particularly capable of producing intense responses when they invoke sacred values and perceived group threats. Lim (2017) shows how social-media infrastructures can sustain sectarian and tribalized narratives, while Salahudin et al. (2020) demonstrate the relationship between online Islamic political discourse and polarization during electoral competition. Once antagonistic labels and collective blame become routine, political conflict can persist beyond election cycles and enter

everyday social relations. The democratic costs of identity politics must therefore be assessed not only through electoral outcomes but also through social trust, civic equality, and the capacity to sustain relationships across political difference.

The democratic ambivalence of identity politics leads to a key conclusion: identity itself is not the variable that determines democratic quality; the mode of mobilization is. Comparative readings of Indonesian elections and Islamic populism show that religious identity can operate as representation, strategic constituency-building, or exclusionary boundary-making depending on the actors and political context (Widian et al., 2023; Jati, 2024; Qodir, 2025). Identity-based politics remains democratically defensible when it articulates interests and respects equal citizenship. It becomes corrosive when it relies on stigmatization, collective blame, or the denial of political legitimacy to outsiders. This distinction provides a bridge to Islamic political ethics, which evaluates the moral mode of mobilization rather than merely the presence of religion in politics.

Islamic Political Ethics and the Limits of Identity Mobilization

Islamic ethics provides a normative vocabulary for evaluating identity politics without requiring religion to withdraw from public life. The first principle is recognition of diversity. Qur'an 49:13 presents human plurality as a condition for mutual knowledge rather than a basis for superiority. This normative principle is especially relevant in an Indonesian context where scholarship demonstrates both sustained religious contestation and context-dependent traditions of tolerance (Barton et al., 2021; Budiatri, 2025). Applied politically, recognition of diversity challenges claims that a religious, ethnic, or social identity automatically confers greater civic worth. Identity can shape political association, but it should not determine the dignity or citizenship status of those outside the group.

The second principle is justice. Qur'an 16:90 places justice at the center of moral conduct, and this principle offers a criterion for testing whether religious mobilization protects legitimate interests or merely privileges insiders. The contemporary literature on Islamic populism and political identity shows why this distinction matters: identity narratives can connect genuine grievances to political action, but they can also be used strategically to legitimize unequal treatment or partisan moral exceptionalism (Jati, 2024; Qodir, 2025). Justice requires a consistent standard across group boundaries. Group loyalty cannot ethically excuse conduct that would be condemned if performed by political opponents.

The third principle is brotherhood and reconciliation. Qur'an 49:10 emphasizes fraternity among believers and the obligation to repair conflict. Empirical scholarship on major Muslim organizations indicates that tolerance and plural coexistence require continuing institutional work rather than

rheterical commitment alone (Mietzner & Muhtadi, 2020; Budiatri, 2025). In political terms, *ukhuwah* does not eliminate disagreement, but it limits the extent to which disagreement should become permanent enmity. Muslim political actors may compete, criticize one another, and organize around different programs while remaining bound by norms that prohibit dehumanization and social fragmentation.

The fourth principle is unity without enforced uniformity. Qur'an 3:103 warns against destructive division, but unity should not be interpreted as the suppression of legitimate difference. Research on contestations of Islamic authority in Indonesia shows that Muslim public life is internally plural and politically dynamic (Pelletier, 2021; Barton et al., 2021). Social cohesion therefore depends on the capacity to manage disagreement rather than erase it. The ethical implication is that political identity should connect citizens to common goods while leaving room for organizational, theological, and electoral diversity. A politics that demands unanimity in the name of unity can itself become coercive.

The fifth principle is moderation, commonly associated with the Qur'anic idea of a middle community in 2:143. Moderation in this context is not political passivity or the avoidance of strong convictions. It is a disciplined refusal to absolutize partisan identity and a commitment to proportionate judgment. Budiatri's (2025) account of dynamic tolerance illustrates that moderation is better understood as an ongoing practice negotiated within social and political contexts than as a fixed organizational label. This principle counters fanaticism because it allows citizens to maintain religious commitments while accepting that political choices remain contestable, fallible, and subject to ethical scrutiny.

Together, these principles set ethical limits on the political use of Muslim identity. Religious identity may legitimately inspire political participation, public morality, solidarity, and advocacy for justice. It crosses an ethical threshold when it legitimizes discrimination, suppresses criticism, converts political opponents into religious enemies, or places group loyalty above justice. This threshold is consistent with contemporary analyses that distinguish plural participation from forms of Islamic populism and political identity that deepen democratic exclusion (Jati, 2024; Qodir, 2025). Islamic political ethics therefore does not require the depoliticization of religion; it requires the moral disciplining of religious mobilization.

Analytical Continuum of Identity Politics

The findings can be synthesized as a four-stage continuum that distinguishes increasingly exclusionary uses of identity. The continuum is analytical rather than deterministic: political movements can move in either direction depending on leadership, institutions, public discourse, social grievances, and media environments. It integrates recurring findings on

electoral religious framing, citizenship, polarization, Islamic populism, and tolerance in the Indonesian literature (Sumaktoyo, 2021; Simandjuntak, 2021; Widian et al., 2023; Jati, 2024; Budiatri, 2025). Its purpose is to clarify why the same religious identity can support democratic inclusion in one instance and social division in another. Table 1 summarizes the stages and the ethical-democratic criteria associated with each form.

The continuum clarifies a common conceptual error in public debate: treating all identity-based political organization as equivalent. Recognition and representation are compatible with democracy because plural societies require channels through which groups can articulate interests; scholarship on unequal citizenship confirms why recognition can itself be a democratic demand (Nalle, 2021; Simandjuntak, 2021). Competitive mobilization is more ambiguous because it can remain legitimate while becoming vulnerable to moral simplification and group pressure (Widian et al., 2023). Exclusionary identity politics marks the decisive threshold because it converts identity into a basis for unequal citizenship or the delegitimation of opponents.

The framework also changes how positive and negative impacts should be interpreted. Solidarity and participation are not automatically democratic goods if they are achieved through the stigmatization of outsiders. Likewise, strong religious identity is not automatically anti-democratic if it motivates justice-oriented public engagement. The Indonesian literature documents both processes: religious mobilization can generate participation and collective capacity, while polarization and conservative identity politics can weaken plural democratic relations (Ahyar & Alfitri, 2019; Jati, 2022; Qodir, 2025). Democratic evaluation must therefore examine both internal effects on the group and external effects on relations with other citizens.

This model offers a practical implication for Muslim civil society, educators, religious leaders, and political actors. The goal should not be to remove identity from politics, which is neither realistic nor necessarily desirable. The more defensible objective is to move identity politics toward recognition and accountable representation while limiting exclusionary mobilization. Recent studies of dynamic tolerance, Islamic identity on social media, and Islamic populism underline the importance of organizational leadership, public discourse, and digital communication in shaping this direction (Budiatri, 2025; Marijan et al., 2025; Jati, 2024). This requires political literacy, responsible religious communication, fair institutions, attention to inequality, and digital norms that reduce incentives for dehumanizing content.

CONCLUSIONS

Religious identity politics in Muslim-majority Indonesia has a dual character. It can strengthen solidarity, political participation, and group representation, but it can also generate polarization and exclusion when religious identity is used to delegitimize political opponents or monopolize

moral legitimacy. This study identifies four forms of identity politics—identity recognition, identity-based representation, competitive identity mobilization, and exclusionary identity politics—showing that the democratic problem lies not in religious identity itself, but in the way it is politically mobilized. From an Islamic ethical perspective, identity-based political participation should remain grounded in justice, brotherhood, moderation, recognition of diversity, and social unity. The study therefore implies that religious identity can contribute positively to democratic life when it functions as a source of ethical responsibility and public solidarity rather than as an instrument of discrimination, hostility, and political exclusion.

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