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Ethical Politics beyond Power: The Alawiyyin's Moral Engagement and Non-Electoral Participation in Democratic Indonesia

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Abstract

In Indonesia, debates around Islam and politics often revolve around tensions between secular democracy and religious identity, usually spotlighting mass-based movements or populist Islamism. However, the role of religious elites like The Alawiyyin—descendants of the Prophet Muhammad—remains understudied despite their subtle influence on political discourse. This research aims to examine how The Alawiyyin in Surakarta interpret Islamic politics and practice political participation without direct involvement in electoral processes. Employing a qualitative case study approach, it draws on data collected through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. The analysis uses triangulation techniques to ensure validity across multiple sources and methods. The research is framed by Bayat's post-Islamism, Roy's depoliticization thesis, Weber's patrimonial authority, and Tilly's concept of contentious politics. The findings indicate that for The Alawiyyin, politics is inherently ethical and inseparable from religious duty, where governance and leadership are regarded as moral responsibilities rather than instruments of power. Their participation is expressed through teaching, *da'wah*, and ethical dialogue, enabling them to influence civic and political values while maintaining independence from partisan agendas. The implication of this research is that Islamic political participation can extend beyond formal institutions, taking the form of ethical leadership and moral engagement that strengthen democratic pluralism in Indonesia.

Keywords: Alawiyyin; Moral Politics; Non-Electoral Participation; Islamic Ethics; Democratic Pluralism

Di Indonesia, perdebatan tentang hubungan Islam dan politik sering berfokus pada ketegangan antara demokrasi sekuler dan identitas keagamaan, dengan sorotan utama pada gerakan massa atau Islamisme populis. Namun, peran elite agama seperti Alawiyyin—keturunan Nabi Muhammad—masih jarang dibahas meskipun mereka memiliki pengaruh halus dalam wacana politik. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji bagaimana komunitas Alawiyyin di Surakarta memahami politik dalam Islam dan bagaimana mereka terlibat dalam politik tanpa terlibat langsung dalam proses elektoral. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan studi kasus kualitatif dengan data yang dikumpulkan melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur, observasi partisipatif, dan analisis dokumen. Analisis dilakukan dengan teknik triangulasi untuk menjaga validitas dari berbagai sumber dan metode. Penelitian ini menggunakan kerangka teori dari Bayat (post-Islamisme), Roy (depolitisasi Islamisme), Weber (otoritas patrimonial), dan Tilly (politik kontestasi). Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa bagi komunitas Alawiyyin, politik tidak dapat dipisahkan dari etika keagamaan, di mana kepemimpinan dan tata kelola dipahami sebagai tanggung jawab moral, bukan sebagai sarana untuk meraih kekuasaan. Partisipasi politik mereka diekspresikan melalui pendidikan, dakwah, dan dialog etis yang memungkinkan mereka memengaruhi nilai-nilai sosial dan politik tanpa terikat pada kepentingan partai atau afiliasi politik tertentu. Implikasi penelitian ini adalah bahwa partisipasi politik Islam dapat melampaui batas-batas institusional formal dengan mewujudkan dalam bentuk kepemimpinan etis dan keterlibatan moral yang memperkuat pluralisme demokrasi di Indonesia.

A. INTRODUCTION

The intersection between Islam and politics in Indonesia has long been a contested field, shaped by historical legacies, ideological debates, and socio-political transformations. Two main tensions define this discourse. First, Indonesia's adoption of a secular democratic framework has encouraged the separation of religion from politics, echoing the 'desacralization of politics' thesis (Poya 2023). Yet, in Muslim-majority societies, rigid secularism has often failed to produce stable democratic consolidation (Bourchier 2019). These limitations raise deeper questions about how religion can coexist with democracy in a plural and multi-faith context. Second, the rise of religiously charged identity politics has intensified polarization across Indonesia's political landscape (Arifianto 2020). While identity-based mobilization is not inherently negative, it has contributed to fragmentation and contestation among Muslim groups (Meléndez and Rovira Kaltwasser 2019). In recent years, government efforts to limit religion's influence on politics have further sharpened these tensions (Nur Fitri and Adeni 2020).

Within this broader debate, scholarly discussions on Islamic political engagement have often revolved around two dominant poles (Akmaliah and Nadzir 2024). The first supports the integration of Islamic ethics into governance, asserting that religious values should guide policy and leadership (Schwadel 2020). The second emphasizes secular inclusivity and democratic norms that transcend religious identity (Wibowo 2020). However, these binary perspectives often overlook the role of religious elites—particularly the *Habaib* or Alawiyyin, descendants of the Prophet Muhammad—who shape political discourse not through electoral participation but through religious legitimacy, moral authority, and social trust (Mawardi and Permana 2022).

Historically, The Alawiyyin have positioned themselves as spiritual and moral leaders rather than political actors (Mawardi and Permana 2022).

Through extensive religious networks and institutions, they have indirectly influenced political attitudes and civic ethics in local communities (Kesuma, Halim, and Syam 2022). While some figures like Habib Rizieq Shihab represent more confrontational modes of activism, most *Habaib* in Java—particularly in Surakarta—exercise influence through *da'wah*, education, and ethical exemplarity (Suparto, Halid, and Mamat 2019). This non-institutional engagement reflects a transformation in Islamic agency, from political confrontation toward moral guidance and social influence.

Surakarta provides an ideal site for this study because of its historical, cultural, and political significance. The city functions as both a symbolic and practical center for national political dynamics (Fatkhurrohman 2022), and as the hometown of President Joko Widodo, it offers a meaningful context for examining religion's evolving role in politics (Rusman, Rafni, and Suryanef 2022). Moreover, the presence of influential Alawiyyin figures such as Habib Ali bin Muhammad bin Husayn Al-Habsyi underscores Surakarta's importance in understanding Islamic moral authority within a democratic setting (Mibtadin, Nuriyanto, and Rachmadhani 2022). Yet, most research on political Islam in the region remains focused on populist and radical movements (Adnan 2021; Sadeghi 2021), neglecting the quieter, ethical, and dialogical modes of political engagement practiced by religious elites. Similarly, studies on *hijrah* movements and popular Islam tend to homogenize Muslim actors, overlooking how elite-based authority functions differently from mass-based activism (Alam et al. 2023; Mibtadin et al. 2022).

This study fills that gap by focusing on how The Alawiyyin understand and practice political engagement as a moral and spiritual responsibility rather than as partisan activism. It aims to analyze how The Alawiyyin in Surakarta interpret Islamic politics and engage in political participation without direct involvement in electoral processes. Using Bayat's concept of post-Islamism, Roy's theory of depoliticized Islamism,

Weber's notion of patrimonial authority, and Tilly's framework of contentious politics, this research explores how The Alawiyyin construct political participation through non-institutional, value-based engagement. In doing so, the study contributes a nuanced understanding of Islamic political agency in Indonesia—one that emphasizes moral leadership, religious ethics, and social trust as alternative foundations for democratic participation.

B. METHODOLOGY

This study is defined as a qualitative research employing a case study approach. This qualitative approach enables the researcher to examine social dynamics and behavioral patterns by directly engaging with participants' perspectives (Denzin 2017). It focuses on analyzing Islamic norms and values—such as those found in the Quran, Hadith, and other religious traditions—and how they are understood, interpreted, and applied in the political context by the *Habaib* community in Surakarta. This study employs a purposive sampling method, where informants are chosen based on specific considerations regarding their knowledge of the subject matter (Campbell et al. 2020). This ensures that they can provide relevant and in-depth insights into the relationship between politics and Islam from the perspective of the *Habaib* community. This approach guarantees that the collected data is essential and effectively supports the research objectives.

Table 1.

List of Informants

No	Informant Names	Organization
1.	Habib Hasan bin Anis Al Habsyi	Masjid Ar Riyadh
2.	Habib Ja'far bin Ali Assegaf	Masjid Jami Assegaf
3.	Habib Muhammad bin Yahya Baraqbah	Masjid Raya Sheikh Zayed

No	Informant Names	Organization
4.	Habib Abdurrahman bin Sholeh Mulachela	Majelis Al Inaabah
5.	Habib Abu Bakar Fahmi bin Muhammad Assegaf	Masjid Jami Assegaf
6.	Habib Ali bin Hasan Al Habsyi	Rabithah Alawiyah Surakarta

To explore the political views and religious practices of The Alawiyyin in Surakarta, the researcher employs several data collection techniques.¹ Variations in data collection methods, such as interviews, participant observation, field notes, and document analysis, allow the researcher to examine the subject matter from different angles (Denzin 2017). First, interviews are conducted to gather direct information from research subjects, allowing the researcher to understand their beliefs and political perspectives (Priya 2021). Second, observation involves direct engagement in religious activities attended by informants, such as *majelis ilmu*, *ziyarah*, and *haul* (Taherdoost 2022). Third, the researcher conducts a literature review, which facilitates the examination of relevant scholarly works, helping to situate the studied phenomenon within a broader theoretical framework. This also provides a historical context for understanding Islamic politics and the political participation of The Alawiyyin (Taherdoost 2021).

The researcher employs technique triangulation by analyzing The Alawiyyin political participation in Surakarta through interviews, which

¹ The *Alawiyyin*, originating from the Bani Alawi lineage, are descendants of the Prophet Muhammad SAW through the line of Imam Husain and Sayyid Alawi bin Ubaidillah, who migrated from Basrah, Iraq, to Hadramaut, Yemen. This group is often recognized as scholars associated with the Alawiyah Sufi order, institutionalized through the *Ba' Alawi* school in Tarim. In Southeast Asia, the *Alawiyyin* are more commonly known as the *Habaib*, a term used to refer to their esteemed position as descendants of the Prophet Muhammad and their influential role in religious and social affairs (Rijal 2022).

are then verified through observations of their sociopolitical activities and document analysis (Denzin 2017). Additionally, source triangulation is used by comparing data from multiple informants. This approach provides a more comprehensive understanding, validates findings, and ensures the accuracy of interpretations regarding the meaning of Islam and the political participation of The Alawiyyin in Surakarta.

Theoretical Framework

This study integrates four key theoretical perspectives, drawing on Bayat (2013) concept of post-Islamism, Roy (1994) notion of Islamism's depoliticization, Max Weber as discussed in Huff and Schluchter (2017) theory of patrimonial authority, and Tilly and Tarrow (2015) framework of contentious politics. Together, these approaches offer a comprehensive analytical lens for understanding The Alawiyyin unique patterns of political engagement and their interaction with Indonesia's democratic landscape.

Asef Bayat's concept of post-Islamism offers a crucial framework for analyzing the transformation of Islamic political engagement in contemporary Indonesia. Post-Islamism refers to the shift from efforts to establish a theocratic state towards democratic participation, pluralism, and social activism (Bayat 2013). While Bayat emphasizes the shift away from state-centered Islamism, his concept raises important questions about how Islamic movements like The Alawiyyin adapt to modern political realities without seeking institutionalized political power. This theoretical perspective is particularly relevant to understanding how Islamic actors adapt to modern political realities, moving beyond rigid Islamist agendas. Instead of seeking control over state institutions, post-Islamism emphasizes the integration of Islamic political thought within democratic governance through non-electoral channels. This shift complicates Roy's notion of depoliticized Islamism, which suggests a retreat of Islamism from politics.

At the same time, The Alawiyyin engagement illustrates how Islamic values can continue to influence politics without formal political authority. Applying this framework to The Alawiyyin allows for an exploration of how Islamic values can shape political engagement in ways that do not rely on formal political authority but operate within existing democratic structures.

Complementing this perspective, Roy (1994) theory of depoliticization of Islamism provides a lens for understanding the strategic adjustments made by Islamic movements when their political aspirations are constrained. Roy argues that as Islamism fails to achieve its objectives through direct political control, it transitions toward cultural and social domains, emphasizing religious and moral influence instead (Ibrahim 2024). This framework is instrumental in examining how Islamic actors maintain political relevance by embedding their influence within societal structures rather than through formal political mechanisms. When applied to The Alawiyyin, Roy's theory highlights their ability to navigate Indonesia's democratic settings, leveraging religious legitimacy and social influence, rather than relying on direct political control, thus complicating the binary distinction between Islamism and depoliticization. The application of Roy's theory in this study allows for a deeper understanding of how The Alawiyyin engagement reflects a broader trend of Islamic movements repositioning themselves within democratic settings while maintaining their religious legitimacy.

Max Weber's concept of patrimonial authority further informs the analysis of The Alawiyyin position within Indonesia's socio-political order. Weber defines patrimonial authority as traditional legitimacy based on inherited status and lineage, often reinforced by religious or cultural norms (Huff and Schluchter 2017). The Alawiyyin, as descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, derive their authority from both religious and genealogical legitimacy. However, this form of legitimacy operates within a modern

democratic framework, raising questions about how traditional authority adapts to contemporary governance structures. Furthermore, Weber concept of authority allows for an examination of the tensions between traditional legitimacy and the democratic structures of modern Indonesia, where The Alawiyyin influence operates outside of institutionalized political systems.

As a contrasting perspective, Charles Tilly's concept of contentious politics highlights different modes of political participation. Tilly defines contentious politics as collective action through protests, demonstrations, and direct challenges to state authority (Tilly and Tarrow 2015). While many Islamic movements engage in contentious politics to exert influence, The Alawiyyin approach does not align with this model. Instead, their political engagement operates through religious discourse, educational initiatives, and strategic positioning within elite networks. This distinct approach complicates Tilly's model of contentious politics, as The Alawiyyin influence is not exerted through confrontation but rather through the subtle, yet powerful, influence of religious authority and social networks. By juxtaposing Tilly's framework with those of Bayat, Roy, and Weber, this study aims to demonstrate that political participation is not limited to formal institutions or mass mobilization but can manifest through alternative mechanisms within established socio-political structures.

By synthesizing these theoretical perspectives, this study provides a structured framework for analyzing The Alawiyyin political engagement in Indonesia. The integration of post-Islamism, depoliticization of Islamism, patrimonial authority, and contentious politics allows for a multidimensional analysis of their role in shaping Indonesia's political landscape. This approach moves beyond binary classifications of Islamic actors as either Islamists or secularists, instead presenting a nuanced understanding of how religious legitimacy and socio-political influence

intersect in a democratic context. Through this theoretical framework, the study positions The Alawiyyin as key actors who navigate Indonesia's evolving political environment in ways that challenge conventional models of Islamic political participation.

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal how The Alawiyyin in Surakarta construct a distinctive model of Islamic political participation rooted in religious ethics rather than institutional power. Their understanding of politics is grounded in the idea that leadership and governance must embody moral responsibility, justice, and public welfare as central Islamic values. The discussion that follows elaborates on four interrelated themes: The Alawiyyin's interpretation of Islam and politics, their patterns of political participation, the theoretical implications of their ethical engagement through Weberian and post-Islamist lenses, and their meritocratic approach that stands in contrast to populist and identity-based politics in Indonesia.

1. The Alawiyyin Interpretation of Islam and Politics

The Alawiyyin community in Surakarta perceives Islam as a religion and a fundamental framework for life. They practice Islam as an inherited teaching passed down from the prophets. For them, Islam signifies total submission (taslim) to Allah, serving not only as a spiritual foundation but also as the key to attaining peace and divine blessings. This submission manifests through a sincere mental, spiritual, and physical disposition, ensuring that every action, thought, and behavior is undertaken with pure devotion to Allah alone. They regard Islamic rules—both commands and prohibitions—as the primary guidelines for living according to divine will.

This perspective is further elaborated by the research informants during the interview sessions, as follows:

Islam, in its literal meaning, signifies complete submission to Allah. In essence, all religions are fundamentally Islam, as stated in the Quran: *Innaddina 'indAllahil Islam*. (Habib Hasan bin Anis Al Habsyi 2024).

Taslim refers to total submission to the norms and regulations established by Islam. (Habib Muhammad bin Yahya Baraqbah 2024).

Furthermore, The Alawiyyin emphasize the importance of social relations and obligations toward fellow human beings. The concept of *hablumminannas*, or interpersonal relations, is essential to of religious practice. They stress the need to regulate everyday social interactions, ethics, and morality. According to their understanding, fair and respectful treatment of others should transcend differences in social status, economic standing, ethnicity, or nationality. They assert that maintaining harmonious relationships with others is an integral aspect of religious practice, in line with the teachings of Prophet Muhammad. Thus, from The Alawiyyin perspective, Islam encompasses both deep spiritual dimensions and the practical application of its teachings in daily life, involving a personal connection with Allah and ethical and just social interactions. These perspectives align with the views expressed by the research informants, who elaborated on the matter as follows:

The relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims can be explained through three concepts of brotherhood: *ukhuwah Islamiyah* (brotherhood among Muslims), *ukhuwah wathaniyah* (national brotherhood), and *ukhuwah basyariyah* (universal human brotherhood). These three concepts reflect Islamic teachings that recognize humans as social creatures who depend on one another, regardless of religious or ideological differences. (Habib Abu Bakar Fahmi bin Muhammad Assegaf 2024).

In Islam, interacting and engaging in transactions (*muamalah*) with non-Muslims is not an issue, as long as the principles of mutual respect and trust (*amanah*) are upheld. It is prohibited to insult or demean others, including those of different faiths. (Habib Ali bin Hasan Al Habsyi 2024).

In addition, their interpretation of Islamic politics reveals that The Alawiyyin in Surakarta do not view Islam solely as a spiritual guide but also as a political framework. They believe that principles of justice, good governance, and equitable public policies must align with Islamic values. In their view, leadership is a crucial element inseparable from religion and is vital for maintaining a just and moral social order. The Alawiyyin assert that Islam provides legitimacy and an ethical framework for political activities, prioritizing the establishment of a just society and governance grounded in Islamic moral principles. According to their interpretation, politics should be conducted with a commitment to ethics, justice, and morality, as prescribed by Islamic teachings. Rather than a mere pursuit of power, politics is seen as implementing religious principles in governance. The conceptual framework outlined above aligns with the views of the research informants, as illustrated in the following statements:

In the Islamic perspective, good governance operates in accordance with the decrees of Allah and His Messenger. The role of politics is not to create new laws but to implement, regulate, and enforce them to ensure that human life remains just and aligned with divine teachings. (Habib Ja'far bin Ali Assegaf 2024).

Engaging in politics to benefit others is permissible in Islam. However, pursuing political leadership driven by personal ambition is considered less commendable. (Habib Ali bin Hasan Al Habsyi 2024).

The Alawiyyin also root their political engagement in the teachings of the Muhammad, believing that participating in politics within religious boundaries is a duty to ensure justice, societal welfare, and the greater good of the *ummah*. They maintain that political leaders in an Islamic context must govern as a trust (*amanah*) from Allah, acting with accountability and adherence to religious principles. This understanding is articulated by the research informants during the interview sessions, as follows:

The principles of Islamic politics are derived from the examples set by the companions of the Prophet Muhammad, such as *Sayyidina* Abu Bakr, *Sayyidina* Umar, *Sayyidina* Ustman, and *Sayyidina* Ali. Despite their differences, they possessed a deep understanding of religion yet did not excommunicate one another. This political tradition is founded upon the laws revealed by the Prophet Muhammad, which later evolved into the framework of Islamic political principles. (Habib Abdurrahman bin Sholeh Mulachela 2024).

The Prophet Muhammad demonstrated that good politics prioritizes peace and the well-being of the *ummah*. (Habib Muhammad bin Yahya Baraqbah 2024).

Overall, The Alawiyyin in Surakarta perceive Islamic politics as an ethical practice, firmly grounded in the values of the Qur'an and Sunnah, viewing leadership as a divine trust that must be exercised with the utmost integrity in accordance with Islamic teachings. The Alawiyyin community in Surakarta perceives Islam as a religion and a comprehensive framework guiding life. Their belief in Islam transcends spiritual practice, encompassing social, political, and moral dimensions. Islam is viewed as a complete submission (*taslim*) to Allah, deeply intertwined with their understanding of governance and social ethics. While this perspective reflects a traditional view, it raises important considerations regarding how adherence to Islamic principles aligns with broader political and state dynamics, particularly in a pluralistic society. The Alawiyyin approach to politics is not purely religious; it also represents a form of social negotiation, aimed at avoiding the risks of political instrumentalization. Their commitment to Islamic teachings serves as a safeguard against political co-optation, preserving their autonomy within a complex political landscape.

Table 2.

The Alawiyyin Political and Religious Thought

Key Themes	Interpretation and Reflection
Islam as Submission (<i>Taslim</i>)	Islam is considered as a total submission to Allah's will, which deeply informs their personal and social ethics. This interpretation contrasts their political neutrality with more active, populist Islamists.
Politics as Governance, not Power	The Alawiyyin view political engagement as pursuing ethical governance, rather than political power itself. This aligns with their strategic silence, where public endorsement is avoided to preserve their moral authority.

The Alawiyyin also stress the importance of social relations and obligations toward others. The concept of *hablumminannas* (interpersonal relations) extends beyond religious rituals to encompass social justice. While this moral framework fosters community cohesion, it could be interpreted as a strategic positioning to maintain influence without directly engaging in political struggles, potentially safeguarding their symbolic capital.

2. Political Participation of The Alawiyyin Community

In the context of political participation in Surakarta, The Alawiyyin community adopts a distinct approach that diverges from conventional political engagement. Rather than actively participating in political arenas, they opt for a more passive stance, refraining from overtly expressing political support. This approach is not without rationale; The Alawiyyin prioritize moral and spiritual endorsement of individuals they believe genuinely uphold and implement the principles of *shari'ah* in their governance. Their political stance reflects a deep commitment to Islamic values, placing spiritual and moral interests above politics' often conflict-ridden and power-driven nature. This commitment to political neutrality

and moral leadership is further elaborated by key figures within The Alawiyyin community, who provide the following insights:

Our teachers do not engage directly in practical politics or openly endorse any candidates. They deliberately avoid involvement in political parties or overt campaigning. Even I, as the Chairman of *Robitoh*, am prohibited from publicly supporting any particular party. (Habib Ali bin Hasan Al Habsyi 2024).

In society, the primary focus in selecting a leader should not solely be on regulations or authority but rather on their obedience to and fear of Allah. When people deepen their religious knowledge, attend *majelis ta'lim*, and strive for self-improvement, they become better prepared to choose leaders with strong moral character. (Habib Abdurrahman bin Sholeh Mulachela 2024).

Furthermore, religious institutions affiliated with The Alawiyyin, such as Masjid Riyadh and *Assegaf Mosque*in Surakarta, consistently maintain political neutrality. These institutions, serving as spiritual and social centers for the community, emphasize the development of religious values and social welfare over direct involvement in practical politics. Their efforts to preserve spiritual integrity and avoid polarization within their congregation take precedence, illustrating that, for The Alawiyyin, the sanctity of places of worship must be safeguarded from becoming arenas for political contestation. Their focus on spiritual development also serves to instill broader Islamic values, which extend beyond religious life to foster a harmonious social existence. This emphasis on religious integrity and non-involvement in politics is echoed by the mosque leaders themselves, as conveyed in the interviews:

Riyadh Mosque remains entirely uninvolved in politics. Although politicians may visit the mosque, we do not engage in political activities. Politicians know that seeking political endorsement from Riyadh Mosque is not an option. Even if they come here, they never request support. (Habib Hasan bin Anis Al Habsyi 2024).

Assegaf Mosque operates with independent management and regulations. It does not direct political preferences toward any specific figure. While candidates or public figures are welcome to visit, Assegaf Mosque neither endorses nor supports any particular candidate. In this regard, the mosque remains neutral and refrains from engaging in political campaigns or endorsements. (Habib Ja'far bin Ali Assegaf 2024).

Within the broader landscape of local and national politics—particularly during pivotal political events such as the 2024 Surakarta Mayoral Election and the 2024–2029 Presidential Elections—The Alawiyyin have consistently upheld a position of neutrality. This approach aligns with the broader tendency among Indonesian religious scholars to remain above practical politics, a sentiment expressed by key figures in The Alawiyyin community:

Habib Rizieq's experience in the 2019 election served as a valuable lesson for other ulama regarding the risks of direct political involvement. By openly endorsing a particular candidate, he faced significant repercussions when that candidate lost, ultimately diminishing the support he had previously enjoyed. This highlights the considerable risks for religious scholars or figures who openly align themselves with a specific political faction. Consequently, many Ulama and *Habaib* in Indonesia remain above practical politics, positioning themselves as advisors or moral guardians for all sides rather than endorsing any particular candidate. This approach allows them to maintain neutrality and be more widely accepted across different segments of society. (Habib Abu Bakar Fahmi bin Muhammad Assegaf 2024).

Personally, in the mayoral election, I did not endorse or direct support toward any particular candidate. I exercised my right to vote without making any specific requests for support. (Habib Ja'far bin Ali Assegaf 2024).

A critical reflection on this claim of neutrality suggests that The Alawiyyin position may be more influenced by a tendency to preserve their legitimacy and moral symbolism in Indonesia's highly polarized society. While they assert neutrality to avoid political polarization, they function as moral guides in politics, ultimately granting them greater influence in shaping the political narrative without directly engaging in it.

Their decision to refrain from explicit political affiliations reflects their commitment to mitigating societal polarization rather than exacerbating it. They concentrate on religious education and community development within faith and social engagement, demonstrating a preference for promoting internal stability and equilibrium. This stance helps maintain peace within their community and positions The Alawiyyin as mediators capable of playing a significant role in fostering dialogue between diverse groups in Indonesia's multicultural and multi-religious society.

In Surakarta, The Alawiyyin adopt a distinctive political participation approach, reflecting both their spiritual integrity and strategic silence in preserving symbolic capital. Rather than engaging directly in political contests, they refrain from overt expressions of political support, emphasizing moral and spiritual endorsement of leaders who genuinely uphold *shari'ah* principles. This form of political abstention might be seen as a response to the risks of political co-optation—by remaining neutral, they avoid the dangers that religious figures face when aligning too closely with political factions, as highlighted by Habib Rizieq experience in the 2019 elections.

Table 3.

Alawiyyin Approach to Political Neutrality and Spiritual Influence

Political Engagement	Critical Reflection
Neutrality in Politics	Their reluctance to engage overtly in politics allows them to maintain influence without being associated with any particular political faction. This neutrality is strategically advantageous in preventing their moral authority from being compromised.
Spiritual Endorsement	By focusing on the moral qualities of leaders, they preserve their position as moral guides, able to influence governance without compromising their spiritual and ethical standards.

In the broader political landscape of Surakarta, particularly during elections, The Alawiyyin continue to adhere to this neutral stance. While preserving their symbolic capital, this approach may also be interpreted as a form of silent political resistance, where non-participation is a critical form of engagement.

3. Political Interpretation of The Alawiyyin: A Weberian and Post-Islamist Analysis

The Alawiyyin perceive politics as an intrinsic and essential element of Islamic practice, emphasizing that political engagement is not only permissible but also a fundamental component of Islamic teachings. They firmly believe that politics must be conducted with full awareness of absolute obedience to Allah and adherence to the teachings of Prophet Muhammad, which they regard as a crucial aspect of a Muslim's faith. For The Alawiyyin, implementing Islamic values in politics is not a mere choice but an obligation encompassing all aspects of life, including policymaking and governance. In this regard, their political orientation does not simply seek to align with religious precepts in a legalistic manner; rather, it reflects a broader vision of Islamic ethics that shapes governance and societal structures.

This understanding resonates with Asef Bayat's concept of post-Islamism, which asserts that Islamic values can transcend traditional Islamism by integrating democratic principles and modern governance structures without abandoning religious identity (Bayat 2021). Bayat argues that Islam, rather than being imposed as an ideological state apparatus, should serve as a moral compass guiding political and social interactions (Sadeghi 2021). In this light, The Alawiyyin approach does not advocate for the formalization of an Islamic state. Instead, it prioritizes the infusion of Islamic values—justice, morality, and public welfare—into existing political

institutions. This perspective challenges conventional dichotomies between Islamism and secularism, demonstrating that religious values can harmonize with democratic governance rather than existing in opposition to it.

The Alawiyyin further emphasize that politics must reflect ethics, justice, and morality as the foundational principles of Islam. In their view, politics is not confined to administrative governance or the regulation of social interests; rather, it serves as a domain for actualizing Islamic values, ensuring that ethics, justice, and morality remain consistently upheld. Their comprehensive political vision integrates Islamic moral and ethical values not as mere complements but as essential foundations in all aspects of governance. This aligns with Bayat's argument that contemporary Muslim societies increasingly seek a form of governance that accommodates both religious values and democratic aspirations, rather than adhering to rigid ideological frameworks (Hanafi 2015). In this sense, The Alawiyyin interpretation of Islam fosters a political engagement that is neither strictly Islamist nor entirely secular but rather a hybrid approach that integrates Islamic ethics within democratic structures.

In analyzing the relationship between Islam and politics, The Alawiyyin recognize that their political interpretation is deeply intertwined with Islamic values and teachings. Drawing from Max Weber's thought, the subjective interpretation of Islam is crucial in understanding how religion interacts with politics (Al Fozaie 2023). Weber posits that Islam, like other religions, is perceived differently by its followers and is neither static nor standardized, thereby shaping diverse political perspectives (Huff and Schluchter 2017). Within this framework, The Alawiyyin employ the rationalization of Islamic values as a guiding force in their social and political actions. This aligns with Weber's concept of value rationality, wherein religious values are the primary motivation behind social and political conduct (Turner 2023). Consequently, in The Alawiyyin political

actions are driven by a value rationality that aligns their governance with Islamic ethics while engaging with contemporary political realities. This rationalization reflects their nuanced interpretation of Islam, not as a static or dogmatic framework, but as a flexible set of guiding principles for governance.

Bayat's theory further enriches this analysis by highlighting the shift from rigid, ideology-driven politics to a more pragmatic, citizen-oriented engagement with Islam as a guiding ethical force. He argues that post-Islamism represents an evolution where Islamic values are no longer enforced through legal mechanisms but internalized within civil society and political participation (Bayat 2017). The Alawiyyin political engagement reflects this principle; they do not seek to institutionalize Islamic rule through formal legislation but rather to cultivate an ethical political culture that naturally aligns governance with Islamic morality. In doing so, they exemplify what Bayat describes as a movement away from dogmatic applications of Islam towards a more fluid and adaptive engagement with modernity, wherein Islamic ethics function as an integral but non-coercive element of political life (Bayat 2017).

The Alawiyyin interpretation of Islam within a political context produces a nuanced and multifaceted understanding of how religious teachings establish governance's ethical and moral basis in their perspective, politics is not separate from religious values but must embody the principles of justice and morality inherent in Islamic teachings. This reinforces their conviction that politics should be governed according to Islamic principles, ensuring that governmental policies and actions are effective but also just and ethical, as dictated by the beliefs they steadfastly uphold. The rationalization process in Islam does not entail narrowing or restricting the understanding of religious values (Bhojani and Clarke 2023). Instead, rationalization enriches and adds complexity to rationalization

process these values through the subjective processes undertaken by its adherents.

Weber contends that rationalization does not reduce or ossify Islamic values into a static form but rather fosters a deeper and more intricate comprehension of them (Huff and Schluchter 2017). From Weber's standpoint, *shari'ah* law is not merely a set of rigid legal rules but a flexible doctrine that can be adapted to changing social contexts (Turner 2023). Bayat challenges Weber's view that integrating Islamic values into politics inevitably leads to bureaucratic stagnation or authoritarianism. Instead, he argues that within a post-Islamist framework, Islamic values can promote democratic participation and social justice (Bayat 2017). The Alawiyyin share this perspective, advocating for an interpretation of *shari'ah* that upholds morality and social justice while remaining responsive to diverse social realities.

Their approach emphasizes value rationalization, asserting that politics, as part of social life, must align with Islamic principles of justice, equality, and collective welfare. This perspective enriches Islamic political analysis and presents a model where religious values constructively guide political practices.

Bayat further asserts that Islam's political role need not be confined to a secular-Islamist dichotomy; rather, it can function as an ethical force informing political engagement without seeking state control (Bayat 2017). The Alawiyyin embody this by integrating Islamic ethics into political life while maintaining adaptability within contemporary governance structures. This underscores that Islamic values can foster justice, inclusivity, and public welfare without being reduced to rigid ideology.

Ultimately, The Alawiyyin synthesis of Weberian rationalization and Bayat's Post-Islamist framework demonstrates that, when engaged critically and pragmatically, Islam serves as a moral compass that enhances, rather than restricts, democratic participation. Their approach challenges

Weber's concerns about bureaucratic rigidity, illustrating that thoughtfully integrated Islamic values can support a political system grounded in justice, ethics, and the common good.

The Alawiyyin interpretation of Islam in politics draws on a combination of Weberian rationality and post-Islamist thought, which challenges both rigid Islamism and secularism. In a society where political Islam can be easily co-opted for power, their pragmatic engagement reflects an avoidance of politicizing religious values. Instead, they advocate for a governance model that harmonizes religious ethics with democratic ideals, rather than advocating for a theocratic state.

Table 4.

Weberian and Post-Islamist Perspectives on Alawiyyin Thought

Theoretical Frameworks	Analysis
Weberian Rationalization	Weber concept of value rationality is evident in The Alawiyyin interpretation of Islam, where religious values guide political actions without being rigidly imposed.
Post-Islamism	By embracing democratic principles while upholding Islamic values, The Alawiyyin embody a post-Islamist model that does not seek political control but integrates ethics into governance.

Their political engagement emphasizes ethical governance over ideological purity, a strategic silence that shields them from direct political co-optation while influencing societal norms.

4. Beyond Populism: The Alawiyyin Meritocratic Approach to Political Participation

The Alawiyyin perceive political participation as an extension of their religious and moral responsibilities rather than a pursuit of political power. Their role as religious elites places them in a unique position, where their influence is derived from religious legitimacy rather than electoral mobilization. Unlike Islamist movements that actively seek state control, The Alawiyyin prioritize political education and ethical governance, ensuring that Islamic values remain embedded within political discourse without direct political engagement. This aligns with Olivier Roy's argument that traditional ulama function primarily as educators, legal scholars, and community leaders rather than political figures (Ibrahim 2024). Instead of actively contesting for political authority, they see their role guiding society through Islamic teachings, reinforcing the notion that governance should be based on meritocracy and ethical leadership rather than mass appeal or populist rhetoric. Their stance reflects a deep commitment to ensuring political participation adheres to Islamic principles without being co-opted by personal ambition or pragmatic political interests.

This preference for detachment from practical politics does not indicate passivity but rather a strategic form of political engagement that aligns with Charles Tilly's concept of contentious politics. Tilly argues that political influence is not solely exercised through electoral participation but also through informal mechanisms such as discourse, network-building, and ideological mobilization (Castañeda 2023). The Alawiyyin exemplify this by exerting political influence through *ijtihad*—the continuous reinterpretation and renewal of Islamic thought—rather than direct policy-making. Their engagement in Political Islam is thus characterized by intellectual activism rather than institutional politics, demonstrating a form of participation that influences governance without directly contesting for

political power. This also resonates with Roy (1994) concept, where Islamic movements shift away from rigid ideological structures and instead adopt a more integrative and intellectual approach to political engagement. By focusing on shaping political consciousness through religious education, The Alawiyyin challenge the notion that Islamic politics must be defined by state power, instead advocating for an organic integration of Islamic ethics into governance.

Despite their general reluctance to engage in electoral politics, some members of The Alawiyyin have participated in political affairs, but always within the framework of competency-based governance. They emphasize that political involvement should be reserved for individuals with religious and administrative expertise, ensuring that leadership remains ethically and intellectually sound. This position reinforces their rejection of identity-based politics, where religious lineage alone is insufficient to justify political leadership. Instead, they argue for a meritocratic approach, where qualifications, governance capabilities, and adherence to Islamic values determine political authority. This perspective directly contrasts with populist Islamist movements that rely on mass mobilization rather than governance competency, further highlighting The Alawiyyin distinctive approach to Political Islam.

Another significant aspect of The Alawiyyin political stance is their cautious approach to the intersection of religion and state power. While some Islamic groups advocate for an overt Islamization of governance, The Alawiyyin adopt a more measured position, recognizing the dangers of politicizing *shari'ah* for state control. This aligns with Roy (1994) critique of neo-fundamentalism, which he argues has largely failed as a unifying political force for the Muslim world. Instead of seeking to implement *shari'ah* through legal imposition, The Alawiyyin advocate for an approach where Islamic values inform governance without being reduced to political slogans. They reject authoritarian Islamization efforts that attempt to

enforce religious laws without social consensus, arguing that true Islamic governance must be rooted in ethical leadership, social justice, and inclusive policymaking. In this sense, their political engagement mirrors Roy (1994) argument that contemporary Islamic movements increasingly shift toward cultural Islam, where religion shapes political ethics rather than dictates legal structures.

From Tilly's perspective, The Alawiyyin mode of engagement represents a form of non-state political agency (Castañeda 2023). Instead of contesting for direct political authority, they utilize social capital, religious institutions, and moral influence to shape governance. This contrasts with Islamist factions that engage in large-scale political mobilization, as The Alawiyyin strategy is more subtle yet equally impactful. Their ability to navigate Indonesia's heterogeneous political landscape without becoming entangled in direct political conflicts reflects a sophisticated understanding of power dynamics. Their engagement in Surakarta exemplifies how religious elites can stabilize democratic societies, reinforcing moral governance without resorting to radicalization or political coercion.

In essence, The Alawiyyin political participation reflects a hybrid model of Political Islam—one deeply rooted in religious legitimacy yet pragmatically adapted to the realities of modern governance. Their preference for *ijtihad* over radical activism, their emphasis on competence-based governance over populism, and their rejection of authoritarian Islamization efforts all demonstrate an advanced form of political engagement that aligns with both Roy's and Tilly's theoretical frameworks. By positioning themselves as moral guides rather than political actors, they uphold Islamic values in governance without directly competing for state power, thereby offering a unique model of Islamic political agency that is ethically grounded and socially relevant in Indonesia's evolving democratic landscape.

The Alawiyyin interpretation of Islam in politics draws on a combination of Weberian rationality and post-Islamist thought, which challenges both rigid Islamism and secularism. In a society where political Islam can be easily co-opted for power, their pragmatic engagement reflects an avoidance of politicizing religious values. Instead, they advocate for a governance model that harmonizes religious ethics with democratic ideals, rather than advocating for a theocratic state.

Table 5.

Meritocracy and Populism in Alawiyyin Political Thought

Meritocracy vs. Populism	Strategic Reflection
Meritocratic Leadership	By advocating for leadership based on competence rather than mass appeal, The Alawiyyin distinguish themselves from populist politics, positioning themselves as a moral authority in a fragmented political landscape.
Detachment from Populist Rhetoric	Their intellectual engagement and ethical leadership preference over populist mobilization protects them from the risks of political co-optation.

Their stance on meritocratic leadership and ethical governance serves as a critique of the populist Islamization efforts that seek to impose religious law without broader societal consensus. Rather than endorsing populism, they argue for leadership that reflects the deeper values of justice and public welfare, a position that secures their influence without compromising their religious integrity.

D. CONCLUSION

The findings show that The Alawiyyin understanding of politics is inseparable from Islamic ethics, viewing leadership and governance as moral responsibilities rather than avenues for power. The Alawiyyin participate politically through education, *da'wah*, and moral discourse—channels that allow them to shape political values and civic behavior while maintaining autonomy from partisan interests. Their approach demonstrates a distinctive form of Islamic political agency rooted in ethical responsibility and social trust, providing a peaceful and value-driven means of engaging with democratic life.

These findings reflect a broader transformation in how Islamic actors navigate democracy in contemporary Indonesia. The Alawiyyin embodies that disengagement from electoral politics does not necessarily mean political passivity but can represent a conscious and strategic form of engagement that preserves moral credibility in a polarized society. Their ethical approach shows how religious values can be reinterpreted to support justice, inclusivity, and democratic coexistence. In doing so, The Alawiyyin embody a post-Islamist orientation in which Islam functions not as an instrument of power, but as a moral compass guiding civic life.

This study is limited to a single locality and a small circle of key religious figures, which may not fully capture the diversity of Alawiyyin engagement across Indonesia. Future research should explore comparative cases in other cities or regions to examine how local political cultures shape religious elites' strategies of influence. The findings imply that Islamic political participation can transcend formal institutions, taking the form of ethical leadership and value-based engagement that strengthen Indonesia's democratic pluralism.

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