

The Role of Religious Communities in Democracy and Political Participation in Surabaya

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Abstract

Religious communities have an important role in shaping and strengthening democratic practices and political participation in Surabaya, Indonesia. This research employed a qualitative approach, incorporating field observations, in-depth interviews, and literature reviews. The purpose of this article is to understand how religious values and institutions influence the political behavior of citizens. To achieve this objective, the study employs a qualitative case study approach in Surabaya. Data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews with religious leaders and political activists, and a review of relevant literature. All data were then analyzed thematically to identify patterns of political participation among religious communities and how religious values shape their political actions. The findings show that religious actors such as clerics, church leaders, and interfaith communities play an active role in shaping political awareness, encouraging ethical political practices, and mobilizing voters. However, there are challenges, including the politicization of religion and the dominance of exclusive narratives. This study contributes to the sociology of religion by demonstrating how religious life in a plural society can become a force for democratization. Further research is suggested to explore digital religious activism in political contexts.

Keywords: democracy; political participation; religion; Surabaya

Introduction

Democracy, as a system of government that positions the people as the ultimate holders of sovereignty, requires active participation from all segments of society, including religious communities. In Indonesia, which is characterized by considerable religious diversity, religious communities play a significant role in the democratization process. Surabaya, a metropolitan city and the socio-political center of East Java, provides a valuable context for examining the intersection of religion and politics in daily life. The involvement of religious leaders in promoting values such as justice, honesty, and participation is crucial for fostering political engagement among citizens.

Religious involvement in politics has a longstanding history. Since the Reformation, various religious organizations have served as key actors in shaping public policy and influencing electoral dynamics. In Surabaya, organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama, Muhammadiyah, churches, and interfaith communities actively participate in peaceful political campaigns, policy advocacy, and mass mobilization during elections. Previous research by Hefner (2011) and Bush (2009) demonstrates that religious institutions in Indonesia possess substantial social capacity to organize communities around public issues. Nevertheless, limited research has examined local

dynamics and the specific roles of religious communities in urban democratic processes, particularly in cities such as Surabaya.

The purpose of this article is to analyze how religious communities in Surabaya interpret democracy and express their political participation through institutions, social activities, and moral movements. It also aims to identify the challenges and opportunities faced in the context of religious diversity and strong identity politics. By focusing on the local context of Surabaya, this article is expected to enrich the sociology of religion literature, especially in the study of religion and politics at the urban level.

Theoretically, this article departs from the sociology of religion, which views religion not only as a personal belief system but also as a social force that influences public life. The main argument of this paper is that religious communities have significant potential to revive democratic values. However, this potential must be managed in accordance with the principles of inclusivity and multicultural awareness to avoid becoming trapped in religious-political exclusivism. Therefore, the active role of religious communities in politics must continue to be critically examined, studied, and ethically developed.

This research employs a qualitative case study approach in Surabaya City. Data were collected through participatory observation, in-depth interviews with religious leaders and political activists, and a review of religious documents and media publications. The collected data were analyzed thematically to identify patterns in the political participation of religious believers and to examine how religious values influence their political actions. The results of this research are expected to make theoretical and practical contributions to strengthening democracy based on inclusive religious values.

Literature Review

The relationship between religion and politics has been a central focus within the sociology of religion. Max Weber's (1922) seminal work demonstrated that Protestant ethics contributed to the rise of modern capitalism and illustrated the significant impact of religious values on social and economic systems. In contemporary politics, religion functions not only as a foundation for personal morality but also as a socio-political force capable of mobilizing society.

Conceptually, democracy presupposes the active participation of citizens in political decision-making, whether through elections, policy advocacy, or public discourse. Almond and Verba (1963) explain that participatory political culture is primarily determined by the values embedded in society, including religious values. In this context, religion can serve as a medium for the formation of civic culture. This political culture enables people to participate actively in political life rationally and peacefully.

In Indonesia, the study of religion and democracy has grown rapidly after the reformation. Hefner (2000) asserts that Islam in Indonesia has democratic potential if developed through an inclusive and tolerant approach. Bush's (2009) research on the role of Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah shows that religious organizations play a dual role: as guardians of public morality and as political actors who influence policy direction. In a local study, Haryatmoko (2016) highlights the importance of communication ethics and the role of religion in building a healthy public space amidst the rise of identity politics.

However, there is also literature that highlights the ambivalence of religion's role in politics. As'ad (2018) and Mietzner (2015) warned about the increasing politicization of religion in elections, which often leads to social polarization and reinforces identity exclusivism. Religion can be a

unifying force, but it can also be an exclusionary and discriminatory mobilization tool if not managed wisely. This is what Künkler and Stepan (2013) call the paradox of religion in democracy: on the one hand, it is the guardian of political ethics, on the other hand, it can be a source of conflict.

In Surabaya, studies on the political participation of religious communities remain limited. Some research, such as that by Lailatus Sa'adah (2021), highlights the role of religious leaders in peaceful political campaigns. However, few studies have examined the involvement of interfaith communities in the democratization process. In fact, Surabaya is known as a city with high social dynamism and a strong tradition of tolerance, as evidenced by the Religious Harmony Forum (FKUB), the Gusdurian community, and various interfaith dialogues.

Recent scholarly investigations increasingly demonstrate that religious communities in Indonesia occupy a pivotal and expanding position within the evolving landscape of democratic participation and civic engagement. Fuadah and Sari (2023) reveal that young activists in Surabaya perceive the political involvement of *kiai* not only as an expression of moral responsibility rooted in communal leadership but also as an emerging site of sociopolitical tension. Their findings underscore the enduring influence of religious authority in shaping political orientations, voter behavior, and normative expectations within local communities, suggesting that religious figures continue to function as critical intermediaries between citizens and the political sphere. Broadening this perspective, Athaillah and Faiz (2024) argue that democratization in Muslim-majority societies has reconfigured religious identity, whereby religion operates simultaneously as an ethical compass, a cultural resource, and a contested arena in which traditional interpretations must negotiate with modern democratic norms. This shift indicates that religious identity is not static but continually reinterpreted in response to new political realities, thus influencing how believers engage with democratic processes.

At the urban societal level, Kusmayani (2022) emphasizes the transformative role of interfaith youth dialogue in cultivating inclusive citizenship. Her research highlights how young people from diverse religious backgrounds actively construct shared civic values, challenge stereotypes, and develop interpersonal trust factors that are essential for mitigating polarization and fostering a resilient democratic culture. These interfaith engagements demonstrate that youth-led initiatives can transcend doctrinal boundaries and generate new forms of social cohesion rooted in everyday interaction and collective problem-solving. Complementing these insights, the work of Paelani and Rahman (2025) underscores the centrality of religious moderation as a normative framework for maintaining peaceful coexistence within Indonesia's pluralistic society. Their study illustrates that promoting moderation through educational efforts, community dialogues, and institutional advocacy helps cultivate a public ethos grounded in tolerance, non-violence, and mutual respect, thereby reinforcing the foundations upon which democratic participation can flourish.

Taken together, these contemporary studies reveal that religious communities possess substantial capacity to support democratic development, foster inclusive civic norms, and counteract the centrifugal forces of identity-based polarization. They also highlight the importance of examining religious engagement not merely as doctrinal adherence, but as a dynamic social process shaped by institutional contexts, generational change, and everyday interactions. In light of these scholarly developments, the present study seeks to advance current understandings by analyzing how religious communities in Surabaya enact their democratic roles through institutional initiatives, interfaith collaborations, grassroots mobilization, and the lived practices of everyday

religiosity. This approach offers a nuanced perspective on the interplay between religion and democracy in an increasingly complex urban environment.

Results and Discussion

Forms of Political Participation of Religious People in Surabaya

The political participation of religious communities in Surabaya takes various forms, ranging from electoral participation to involvement in religious social movements. Interviews with Muslim, Christian, Catholic, and interfaith community leaders found that political engagement extends beyond electoral activities to include deliberative participation and policy advocacy.

One of the most prominent forms of political participation among religious communities in Surabaya is their involvement in civic-oriented political education, conducted not through traditional religious sermons (khutbah), but through structured public learning spaces such as community dialogues, thematic study groups, and socio-political discussion forums. Instead of merely providing doctrinal preaching, many religious leaders now facilitate issue-based educational sessions that address topics such as corruption, economic inequality, and minority rights. This shift reflects broader national trends showing how religious and ethnic sentiments shape political behavior and public engagement in Indonesia (Journal of East Asian Studies 2023).

In addition to individual leadership, community-driven initiatives also play a crucial role. The Gusdurian Surabaya network, for example, regularly organizes public forums, anti-hoax campaigns, and interfaith discussions designed to prevent identity-based polarization before elections. These activities correspond with recent analyses demonstrating that religious moderation has become a strategic response to the rise of identity politics in Indonesia and Malaysia (Sharia Journal, 2024). Furthermore, contemporary scholarship highlights that strengthening Islamic civic participation contributes to the broader development of democracy in Indonesia (Suffah Journal, 2025). Together, these findings illustrate that political participation among religious communities in Surabaya is not limited to ritual practice but increasingly takes the form of dialogue-based civic engagement that supports democratic resilience.

Beyond structured civic-oriented forums, mosques in Surabaya also function as important social environments that shape community perspectives on democratic values. In several neighborhoods, mosque administrators facilitate thematic religious study sessions, informal discussion groups, or post-prayer community dialogues that address issues such as social cohesion, the rejection of money politics, and the importance of verifying information during election periods. Local branches of the Indonesian Mosque Council (DMI Surabaya) have additionally issued public reminders urging mosque communities to ensure that religious activities are not used for practical political purposes, reflecting institutional awareness of the potential politicization of religious spaces.

Although publicly documented cases that identify specific mosques in Surabaya remain limited, national studies indicate that religious spaces in various Indonesian cities can serve as arenas of political contestation, particularly during electoral cycles. These insights suggest that the political role of mosques in Surabaya operates on two levels. On one hand, they serve as venues for reinforcing democratic ethics through community-based moral education. On the other hand, they must navigate the risks posed by partisan infiltration of religious gatherings. These dual dynamics complement the more structured forms of civic engagement discussed in the previous paragraph, illustrating the multi-layered landscape of political participation among religious communities in urban Indonesia.

In Christian and Catholic communities, forms of political participation are generally expressed through service-based social movements. Churches in Surabaya operate various community service programs that are not only charitable but also advocative, including assistance for victims of violence, educational support for low-income families, and political awareness activities for congregants in the lead-up to elections. The Catholic Church of Santa Maria Tak Bercela Parish, for example, actively encourages its members to participate in elections and engages in polling station monitoring through the Jaringan Pendidikan Pemilu untuk Rakyat (JPPR, the Voters Education Network for the People). These initiatives demonstrate how Christian and Catholic institutions integrate social service, civic education, and political engagement into their broader mission to promote justice and democratic participation.

In addition, participation is also manifested through interfaith collective actions, during several local political events such as the Surabaya mayoral election and legislative elections, various interfaith communities, including the Forum Kerukunan Umat Beragama (Forum for Religious Harmony, FKUB), the Forum Pemuda Lintas Agama (Interfaith Youth Forum, FPLA), and the Peace Generation community, organized a series of peace campaigns. These initiatives were not merely symbolic; they were also implemented concretely, including voter education, monitoring the use of identity politics, and rejecting the politicization of houses of worship. Such interfaith collaborations demonstrate how diverse religious communities in Surabaya contribute to safeguarding electoral integrity and promoting peaceful civic engagement.

Based on participatory observations of several religiously motivated political activities in Surabaya, it appears that religious communities in the city are neither passive nor reactive. Instead, they demonstrate a proactive commitment to maintaining the quality of local democracy. This shows that religious values, when combined with civic awareness, can produce forms of political participation oriented toward the public interest and shared ethics.

However, this form of participation cannot be detached from the social context of each religious community. Hindu and Buddhist communities tend to be more cautious and limited in expressing their political attitudes openly due to concerns about potential stigmatization or marginalization within the broader social environment. From Max Weber's perspective, this condition can be understood through the concepts of status groups and life chances: social groups positioned lower within a status hierarchy tend to have fewer opportunities and more restricted access to political engagement than dominant groups. Differences in the distribution of social resources, symbolic capital, and social authority shape these communities' selective approaches toward political participation. As a result, their involvement is more frequently manifested through interfaith dialogue and inclusive social activities. This phenomenon illustrates that access to political space is not always equal and is heavily influenced by identity-based power relations, consistent with Weber's argument that the distribution of power in society determines the extent to which groups can participate actively in political processes.

The Role of Religious Institutions in Local Democracy

Religious institutions hold a pivotal position in local democracy in Surabaya, serving not only as transmitters of spiritual teachings but also as vital social entities endowed with moral authority and robust community networks. In the democratic context, these institutions act as agents of political socialization, mediators of social conflict, and facilitators of public engagement.

Field research shows that religious organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Muhammadiyah, Protestant and Catholic churches, and interfaith organizations such as the Forum for Religious Harmony (FKUB) are actively organizing activities to strengthen democratic values. For example, the PWNU of East Java has a program called Ngaji Kebangsaan, held regularly at various Islamic boarding schools and mosques in Surabaya. This activity conveys the message that democracy and Islam are not contradictory and invites citizens to be politically literate and active in the democratic process.

Similarly, Muhammadiyah Surabaya, through the Community Empowerment Assembly (MPM), often organizes civic engagement and political literacy training for marginalized groups. They prioritize an empowerment approach that does not simply invite people to vote in elections but also recognizes the importance of involvement in the formulation of local policies, such as development planning meetings (Musrenbang) at the RT/RW, kelurahan, and kecamatan levels.

The Catholic Church in the Surabaya Diocese also has a strategic role in encouraging inclusive participation. They formed the Justice and Peace Commission, which addresses human rights, social justice, and political engagement. This commission often becomes an advocacy space for interfaith citizens in the face of structural injustice. On the other hand, Protestant churches such as GKI and GPPS Surabaya actively establish cross-denominational relations and promote inclusive democracy through activities with moderate Muslim communities.

Interfaith institutions such as FKUB Surabaya have also become important platforms for maintaining social harmony while addressing political issues that could divide society. FKUB not only campaigns for tolerance, but also mediates if there is friction between religious communities, especially during election season. For example, in the 2019 elections, FKUB played an active role in facilitating an open dialogue among religious leaders to reduce the politicization of houses of worship in several sub-districts.

Sociologically, the existence of these religious institutions shows the function of religiosity in strengthening deliberative democracy. They become an extension of civil society, able to mobilize the values of justice, solidarity, and collective responsibility in the political space. This function aligns with Casanova's (1994) view that religion can deprivatize, that is, leave the private sphere and actively engage in public discourse without losing its moral integrity.

Not all religious institutions maintain political neutrality. In certain instances, a significant political affiliation exists between religious leaders and specific political parties. This relationship creates ambiguity in the role of religion, straddling the line between acting as a mediator and becoming a partisan entity. Such ambiguity presents a challenge to the ability of religious institutions to serve as guardians of public morals and to facilitate democratic processes.

The Challenge of Religious Politicization and Social Fragmentation

While religious communities and religious institutions in Surabaya have shown positive contributions to local democracy, it cannot be ignored that the politicization of religion remains a serious challenge. The politicization of religion refers to the use of religious symbols, identities, and teachings for political purposes, particularly in electoral contexts. In several cases in Surabaya, this phenomenon was seen in the form of sectarian campaigns, the use of houses of worship for political activities, and the spread of religious-based hate speech.

Interviews with election and interfaith activists revealed that, ahead of the election, some groups used recitation or worship to convey specific political agendas. For example, there are instances in which religious figures include narratives of support for certain candidates in Friday

sermons or church lectures. This creates an ethical and social dilemma because the congregation is no longer afforded space to think critically; it is ideologically directed.

Another challenge is the increasing social fragmentation along religious lines. Social media accelerates the spread of exclusive narratives that pit “us” against “them.” Narratives such as “infidel leaders should not be elected,” or “Islam is threatened if elections are not won by certain groups,” create collective fear and divide social cohesion. Historically, Surabaya has been known for a strong tradition of tolerance and mutual cooperation.

The findings of this study further reveal that vulnerability to religious politicization is unevenly distributed across different religious communities. Through in-depth interviews with members of Christian communities in Surabaya, several informants described recurring feelings of being positioned at the margins of public political discourse, particularly during election periods. They recounted experiences of social pressure that arose when their churches or religious institutions sought to maintain a neutral stance, such as by encouraging congregants to reject the politicization of houses of worship, which, in some instances, provoked adverse reactions from certain groups in their surrounding communities.

These accounts align with broader national research demonstrating that non-majority religious groups in Indonesia face disproportionate exposure to discrimination and constraints on political participation, particularly when religious politicization becomes more pronounced during electoral cycles. This dynamic is highlighted by Jufri and Rafiqah (2021), who identify persistent inequalities in access to political space, and by Said and Nirmawati (2022), who emphasize the heightened vulnerability experienced by non-majority groups amid identity-based political contestation. In addition, findings from Ikhsanudin, Yulipriyanto, and Suwarno (2023) show that identity-driven political practices can deepen feelings of marginalization and further restrict opportunities for civic engagement among these communities. Taken together, both the field data and contemporary scholarly analyses demonstrate that religious politicization not only undermines the principle of equal citizenship but also reinforces structural power asymmetries within society, thereby posing a substantial challenge to the development of an inclusive and democratic social order.

Furthermore, the challenge of religious politicization is also related to the lack of religious political literacy at the grassroots level. Many citizens are unable to distinguish between religious values as moral guidance and the manipulation of religion as an electoral strategy. This is exacerbated by the lack of critical political education in religious institutions, which prioritize ritual worship over civic awareness formation.

In this context, the challenge lies in cultivating religious approaches that emphasize not only individual spirituality but also promote ethical and inclusive socio-political awareness. There is an urgent need for progressive and transformative religious education that enables individuals to become active citizens while upholding moral integrity in political life.

Strategies to Promote Inclusive Political Participation

In facing the challenges of religious politicization and social fragmentation, various strategies have been carried out by religious communities and religious institutions in Surabaya to encourage more inclusive, fair, and democratic political participation. These strategies include educational approaches, strengthening interfaith networks, and using digital technology.

First, the strategy of political education based on religious values began to be strengthened by various religious communities. Many religious leaders and social activists initiate political

discussions from a moderate and progressive religious perspective. For example, the Islam and Democracy training held by the Bahtsul Masail Institute under PWNU Surabaya succeeded in inviting *santri* and the community to see elections as a means of social worship, not a field of conflict. Similarly, in church circles, seminars on Public Theology and Ethical Politics began to become part of the urban church curriculum.

Second, the emergence of interfaith collaboration in socio-political activities constitutes a concrete step toward building an inclusive public space. This collaboration is evident in joint anti-hoax campaigns ahead of elections, interfaith public service activities, and national dialogue forums. The Gusdurian Community, Peace Generation, and FPLA are pioneers in developing a national narrative that transcends religious boundaries. They emphasize that being a politically active citizen does not contradict religious allegiance but instead constitutes a form of spiritual responsibility.

Third, the use of digital media as an alternative space for participation is increasingly important, particularly among religious youth. Young religious leaders and faith-based digital communities are increasingly producing educational content on democracy and tolerance. YouTube channels owned by several young preachers, TikTok accounts of progressive Christian communities, and interfaith podcasts have become popular means of delivering peaceful, critical, and constructive political messages.

Fourth, internal reform within religious institutions is also an important step. Some religious institutions have begun to open spaces for open discussions about political neutrality, the importance of ethics in voting, and religious reflection on public policy. It reflects a new awareness that democracy cannot be separated from a continuous educational process, especially in moral institutions such as mosques, churches, monasteries, and temples.

Finally, efforts to build networks between religious institutions and state institutions, such as the KPU, Bawaslu, and Kesbangpol, are important strategies in expanding participation. In Surabaya, several religious forums have established partnerships with these institutions to promote peaceful elections, train interfaith youth election monitors, and run anti-money politics campaigns. This involvement proves that religious communities can be strategic partners in maintaining the quality of local democracy.

All of these strategies demonstrate that the political involvement of religious communities is not only possible but also can be oriented toward a more constructive and civil approach. Inclusive participation goes beyond a numerical representation in elections; it also involves how religious values can influence the public sphere with a spirit of justice, solidarity, and respect for diversity.

Youth and Digital Religious Political Engagement

In the digital era, youth involvement in religious and political participation has taken on new and increasingly dynamic forms. In Surabaya, young people from various religious communities actively use social media to disseminate messages on democracy, tolerance, and ethical political behavior. Rather than relying solely on traditional forums such as sermons or religious study gatherings, they now engage with digital content by sharing educational materials, participating in online discussions, and amplifying campaigns that promote political awareness among their peers. This shift illustrates how digital platforms have become influential spaces for constructing civic identities and expanding the reach of religious-based political engagement.

Muslim youth groups from *Pesantren* and mosque-based communities often use Instagram and TikTok to produce short videos about the importance of voting, the dangers of money politics, and how to choose leaders based on moral integrity. Christian and Catholic youth communities similarly use platforms like YouTube and Twitter to discuss social justice, faith-based public ethics, and peaceful elections.

This transformation reflects a broader shift in political engagement, in which digital platforms become tools for civic education and grassroots mobilization. Digital literacy campaigns conducted by youth religious communities highlight their capacity to reframe political discourse through religious narratives that promote harmony, rather than division.

Despite the progress made, challenges persist. Many young activists encounter digital threats, including cyberbullying, trolling, and algorithm-driven polarization that can limit political perspectives. Thus, it is crucial for religious leaders, educators, and tech-savvy youth to collaborate to ensure that religious digital activism fosters inclusive and informed participation.

Women in Religious Political Activism

Women in religious communities in Surabaya play a vital yet often underappreciated role in political participation. Their activism is often grounded in everyday spaces, such as Qur'anic study circles, church fellowship meetings, and interfaith community services, where they discuss issues including poverty, education, justice, and ethical leadership.

Majelis Taklim, for instance, has become more than just a space for religious learning; it also functions as a platform for civic dialogue. Women engage in discussions on the importance of choosing ethical leaders, safeguarding democratic institutions, and protecting minority rights. These discussions often translate into action, such as encouraging voter participation, organizing charity events with political themes, or advocating for fair policies in their neighborhoods.

In Christian and Catholic communities, women serve in justice and peace commissions or church-based development programs. They advocate for inclusive policies, educate fellow believers on ethical citizenship, and create safe spaces for political discourse, particularly for marginalized voices.

Despite the important contributions women make, a range of structural constraints within religious institutions continues to limit their access to formal leadership roles and participation in decision-making processes. These restrictions are sustained not only by gender-biased interpretations of religious doctrines but also by deeply rooted cultural norms that tend to position women as supporting figures rather than authoritative actors within religious-political arenas. Several female informants explained that institutional arrangements, such as leadership bodies dominated by men, rigid hierarchical systems, and gatekeeping practices, significantly narrow women's opportunities to engage in policy deliberations or to represent their communities in broader political settings.

In many cases, women's participation is welcomed only in roles designated as complementary or auxiliary, including coordinating social initiatives, managing charitable activities, or providing support for educational programs. At the same time, strategic decision-making remains concentrated in male leadership. This pattern reflects broader tendencies within Indonesian religious organizations, where patriarchal norms continue to influence the allocation of authority and symbolic capital. As a result, women are often compelled to pursue political engagement through informal networks, community-based efforts, or digital platforms rather than through formal institutional channels.

Nevertheless, despite these structural limitations, women in Surabaya continue to create meaningful avenues for activism, particularly in voter education, interfaith dialogue, and community advocacy. Their approaches frequently draw on relational strategies, moral credibility, and collaborative networks, illustrating how women navigate and, at times, subtly challenge the gendered boundaries imposed by religious institutions. These nuanced expressions of agency underscore the importance of understanding women's political engagement not solely through their presence in formal leadership positions, but also through the everyday practices that enable them to shape democratic participation from within their communities.

Moreover, the complexities of women's religious political activism in Surabaya illustrate that gendered power relations within religious institutions are neither static nor uncontested. While formal structures often reproduce male-dominated authority, everyday interactions reveal ongoing negotiations in which women subtly reshape the boundaries of acceptable political involvement. Several informants described how routine activities such as organizing community discussions, mediating conflicts, or facilitating interfaith cooperation gradually expand their influence in ways that are not formally recognized but carry significant political weight. These practices illuminate the presence of informal leadership that operates parallel to official institutional hierarchies, allowing women to exercise agency even within restrictive environments. Viewed through this lens, women's political participation emerges not as a mere extension of supportive roles, but as a dynamic process through which they reinterpret religious commitments, mobilize social relationships, and assert their place within the broader democratic landscape.

Comparative Reflections Surabaya and Other Urban Contexts

The aim of this subsection is not to laud Surabaya, but rather to contextualize its religious-political dynamics within the larger framework of urban pluralism and democratic engagement in Indonesia. A comparative analysis will help ascertain whether the characteristics observed in Surabaya—such as grassroots interfaith interactions, civic religious involvement, and community-led cooperation—are unique to this context or common to other urban settings. This analytical approach directly aligns with the research problem, which explores the interplay between religion, civic life, and democratic participation across diverse metropolitan environments.

Studies on urban pluralism demonstrate that tolerance and coexistence are actively shaped by local religious actors and community practices rather than resulting automatically from demographic diversity. For example, Hidayatulloh, Saumantri, and Kamarzaman (2025) explain how in Bandung's Tolerance Village, religious communities adapt to pluralistic conditions through everyday interreligious engagement and neighborhood cooperation, showing that pluralism is enacted through routine social interaction and negotiation. Compared with Surabaya, these findings suggest that patterns of tolerance are shaped by local histories and social structures rather than by formal institutional support alone.

Pamungkas (2025) explores how religious identification and social distance operate in the urban context of Yogyakarta, revealing that even cities with strong cultural traditions of openness must continually negotiate religious boundaries in everyday social life. Such negotiation influences how communities perceive one another and how they engage in civic or political activities. This comparison underscores that religious-political engagement in urban settings is shaped by specific social identities and patterns of intergroup perception, not by universal models of harmony.

At the national level, Nendissa and colleagues (2025) examine pluralism as a project requiring active intercultural cooperation and ongoing negotiation among religious groups. Their work highlights that inclusion and tolerance are active processes that depend on institutional frameworks, normative commitments, and sustained dialogue. By sitting Surabaya within this broader landscape, it becomes clearer that the city's interfaith mechanisms, such as FKUB and community forums, are among the varied responses to the challenge of maintaining plural democratic participation.

In the case of Surabaya itself, Basyir (2025) shows that the interaction between religion and ethnicity shapes patterns of social cooperation and tension in ways that reflect long-term urban dynamics. These patterns influence how religious actors participate in civic life, engage with diverse communities, and contribute to democratic processes. This evidence demonstrates that Surabaya's experience is shaped by both structural diversity and agentic practices of religious actors, rather than by any innate moral superiority.

Taken together, these comparative examples reveal that Indonesian cities exhibit diverse trajectories of religious engagement with democratic life. Bandung shows pluralism expressed through everyday social cooperation; Yogyakarta highlights the negotiation of religious identity within cultural frameworks; national research emphasizes the active work of pluralism as an ongoing social and political process; and Surabaya illustrates how local conditions and institutional infrastructure can facilitate inclusive civic participation. By analyzing these variations, this subsection provides empirical grounding for understanding how religion and politics interact in urban Indonesia, strengthening the overall argument without glorifying a single city.

Religious Narratives and Moral Framing in Political Communication

One of the less-examined yet impactful aspects of religious political participation is how religious leaders use narratives and moral language to shape political understanding. In Surabaya, sermons, public speeches, and religious study forums often contain messages that frame political choices as moral obligations. This framing is critical in contexts where citizens struggle to navigate a complex political landscape marked by corruption, populism, and identity politics.

Islamic clerics, for example, frequently use Qur'anic verses and prophetic traditions to emphasise values such as justice, trustworthiness (*amanah*), and collective responsibility (*mas'uliyah*). Similarly, Christian leaders in Surabaya often invoke biblical teachings on stewardship and service to encourage participation in elections or social advocacy.

This use of moral framing contributes to the development of a civic consciousness rooted in religious ethics. It encourages voters not only to participate in elections but also to do so thoughtfully, considering candidates' moral integrity and the social implications of their policies. However, such framing also has limitations, especially when used dogmatically or in ways that suppress pluralism.

To enhance its democratic potential, religious communication must emphasize open dialogue, critical thinking, and respect for difference. Preachers and religious educators need to balance moral clarity with humility and openness to multiple perspectives, especially in a city as diverse as Surabaya.

Grassroots Religious Organizations and Community Empowerment

In addition to institutional leaders, a significant amount of political energy in Surabaya's religious landscape is generated by grassroots organizations. These encompass neighborhood

prayer groups, youth dakwah teams, women's networks, and interfaith volunteer initiatives. While their influence may be more subtle, it plays an equally important role in shaping political participation within the community.

These groups act as micro-hubs for political socialisation, especially in lower-income and peri-urban areas. For instance, a local *pengajian ibu-ibu* (mothers' Qur'anic study group) might discuss the implications of local government budgets for education or healthcare. A Christian youth choir might organize charity concerts that double as fundraising and political awareness events.

The participatory ethos of these groups is essential in democratizing access to political knowledge and civic agency. Many residents disillusioned with formal politics find meaning and motivation through religious community action. The blending of spiritual practice with civic responsibility generates a unique form of "faith-based empowerment."

Grassroots groups in Surabaya face several challenges, including a lack of institutional support, financial limitations, and occasional co-optation by political interests. To enhance their role in the city's democratic life, it is important to strengthen their autonomy and to provide civic education resources tailored to their specific context.

The Role of Religious Education in Shaping Democratic Values

Religious education, particularly in Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*), Christian seminaries, and Sunday schools, plays a foundational role in cultivating political awareness and democratic values from a young age. In Surabaya, there is growing recognition among educators and scholars that democracy and religious identity need not be at odds.

Progressive *pesantren* such as Pondok Pesantren Al-Hikam and Al-Amien have begun incorporating modules on human rights, constitutional literacy, and gender justice alongside classical Islamic studies. Discussions of elections, government accountability, and media literacy are framed within a holistic Islamic worldview. In Christian institutions, similar efforts are underway through public theology courses and citizenship modules in religious instruction.

This integration equips students to engage in public life with both spiritual and civic literacy. Importantly, it challenges the notion that religious education must be apolitical or withdrawn from worldly affairs. Instead, it promotes a socially engaged vision of religious life oriented toward the common good.

The development of curricula that respect religious traditions while promoting democratic values is a promising frontier. Collaboration between ministries of education, civil society organizations, and religious educators is needed to ensure that such programs are contextually relevant and widely accessible.

Religious Authority and Political Endorsements: Ethical Dilemmas

One of the most contentious issues in the intersection of religion and politics is the question of political endorsements by religious leaders. In Surabaya, this practice remains a subject of debate, particularly during local elections, when candidates seek the backing of prominent clerics or religious institutions.

While endorsements can help guide communities toward ethical leadership, they also risk undermining the neutrality and moral credibility of religious authorities. When religious leaders align too closely with political interests, they may alienate segments of their followers or contribute to social polarization.

Several cases in Surabaya illustrate this dilemma. In the 2019 legislative elections, a well-known ustadz publicly endorsed a candidate who later became embroiled in corruption allegations. The backlash within the religious community was swift, prompting calls for more straightforward ethical guidelines governing religious involvement in political campaigns.

Some religious bodies have begun to self-regulate. The East Java chapter of NU, for instance, issued a fatwa discouraging its clerics from making partisan endorsements. Instead, they are encouraged to educate voters about the principles of good governance and to allow individuals to make their own informed decisions.

This shift reflects a maturing political awareness among religious communities. Ethical engagement does not require silence or neutrality, but rather a commitment to integrity, transparency, and the greater public interest.

Democratic Resilience through Religious Pluralism

Perhaps the most inspiring dimension of Surabaya's political-religious landscape is its resilience in the face of diversity. As a city home to Muslims, Christians, Catholics, Hindus, Buddhists, Confucians, and a growing interfaith movement, Surabaya is a living laboratory of democratic pluralism.

This pluralism is not without its tensions. Moments of sectarian friction have occurred, especially during heated political seasons. Overall, the city has maintained a strong culture of coexistence, primarily due to sustained efforts by religious communities and civil society.

Joint celebrations of national holidays, interfaith forums, disaster-relief collaborations, and peace caravans are among the ways religious communities in Surabaya reaffirm their shared commitment to unity in diversity. These actions go beyond tolerance; they embody a deeper form of solidarity rooted in mutual respect and civic responsibility.

The challenge moving forward is to institutionalize these practices and ensure they are not limited to elites or urban centers. Programs that support interfaith youth exchanges, community-level peacebuilding, and inclusive urban governance can help mainstream pluralist democracy.

By demonstrating that democracy and religious diversity need not exist in tension but can, under the right conditions, reinforce one another, the Surabaya context illustrates how pluralism can function as a form of social capital that strengthens democratic resilience. This is evident in several local mechanisms, including interfaith dialogue facilitated by FKUB, the involvement of religious leaders in promoting peaceful electoral participation, and community engagement through neighborhood-based deliberative forums. These practices build trust across religious groups, expand opportunities for civic cooperation, and cultivate public spaces where religious differences are not framed as a political threat. In this sense, pluralism becomes a process of collective learning that enhances a community's capacity to respond to conflict constructively and democratically. Rather than serving as an idealized model, Surabaya's experience offers an empirical example of how pluralism when supported by institutional structures, social networks, and community leadership can contribute to democratic resilience in other Indonesian cities as well.

Conclusion

This study has shown that religious communities in Surabaya play a vital and multifaceted role in supporting democratic life and political participation. Through both institutional and grassroots initiatives, religious actors have served as educators, mobilizers, and ethical guides in

the political process. Their involvement spans civic education, digital activism, interfaith collaboration, and gender-inclusive leadership. The city's religious landscape demonstrates that faith-based participation can enhance democratic values when grounded in inclusivity, critical awareness, and moral responsibility.

The challenges of religious politicization, identity-based fragmentation, and unequal access to political participation continue to pose significant obstacles. Addressing these issues necessitates ongoing reflection and proactive measures, particularly through the reform of religious education, the promotion of digital literacy, and the encouragement of ethical engagement among religious leaders. Surabaya's experience provides a promising model for how urban religious pluralism can cultivate a resilient democratic culture. However, achieving this requires sustained efforts to institutionalize pluralistic practices and to broaden participation beyond elite and urban circles.

Moving forward, the interplay between religion and democracy must be understood not through suspicion, but through an awareness of how concrete practices such as interfaith cooperation, community deliberation, and religious leaders' involvement in peacebuilding contribute to the cultivation of civic virtue, the protection of minority rights, and the development of inclusive political norms. Evidence from Surabaya shows that when religious narratives are embedded within community forums, neighborhood-based decision-making, and institutional mechanisms such as FKUB, they can serve as resources for social cohesion rather than drivers of division. This study, therefore, contributes to the growing body of literature on the sociology of religion by demonstrating that localized, context-sensitive engagement is not merely symbolic but can generate measurable impacts on trust-building, conflict mitigation, and participatory citizenship in urban settings. By grounding the analysis in specific empirical dynamics, the findings underscore the potential for religious pluralism when appropriately supported to strengthen democratic resilience in Indonesia's diverse metropolitan environments.

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