

Islam and Indonesian Political Literacy: Religious Approach to Political Education in Sambas Regency

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Abstract

This article analyzes political education using a religious approach by election organizers in Sambas Regency. This study is qualitative research with a phenomenological approach, with the General Election Commission (KPU) and the Election Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu) of Sambas Regency as the locus of the study. Data was collected from March to June 2022 through participative observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. The informants in this study included six people, consisting of one commissioner of the General Election Commission (KPU) of Sambas Regency, two Democracy Volunteers in religious areas, and three commissioners of the General Election Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu) of Sambas Regency. The data were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman model interactive qualitative analysis technique, namely data reduction, data display, and conclusion. Data analysis shows that using a religious approach in political education is inseparable from the socio-religious background of the Sambas Regency society, which is mostly Malay, where Islam plays a significant role in the life of the Sambas Malay people. Implementing political education is by engaging religious institutions in various political education programs. The engagement of religious institutions is based on the argument that they are opinion leaders of Muslims and have a better understanding of the proper religious narratives in explaining elections and politics to the religious society. Political education with a religious approach is also carried out by utilizing Muslim religious celebrations and ceremonies to socialize politics and elections in society. Based on these findings, the conclusion is that religion plays a role in religiosity and spiritual life and is consumed and commodified as a tool to enhance a society's political understanding and knowledge. The study's findings could contribute to designing an academic manuscript for public policies, especially on political education carried out by the government and election officials in Indonesia.

Keywords: political education, political literacy, religious approach, Sambas regency

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A. Introduction

An essential pillar of a democratic system is the mechanism for periodically expressing people's aspirations through general elections (Diniyanto, 2016; Noor & Marlina, 2023). The necessity for general elections to be held regularly is due to several reasons. First, people's opinions or aspirations regarding several aspects of life are dynamic. Second, the reality of social life in society can also change, either due to international dynamics or domestic factors. Third, changes in the aspirations and opinions of the people could occur due to the increase in the adult population, and new voters may have different aspirations than their parents. Fourth, elections need to be held regularly to ensure the process of changing the leadership of the State (Asshiddiqie, 2007).

To achieve quality democracy, efforts to improve political literacy through public political education are crucial (Djumadin, 2021; Kurniadi, 2019; Sant, 2021). In this context, political literacy correlates with public awareness of political rights and obligations, understanding various political issues and dynamics, and making political decisions based on argumentative considerations (Pambayun et al., 2021; Sahid & Nurjaman, 2017). At this point, proper political literacy of the community has implications for increasing active participation and using their voting rights wisely. Thus, elections not only create a quality democratic climate but also provide qualified leaders.

The General Election Commission (KPU) and the General Election Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu) have a crucial role in political education in Indonesia. In this context, the General Election Commission (KPU) is obligated to organize elections according to regulations and educate the public regarding the importance of public participation and various issues in elections. Likewise, the General Election Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu), on the one hand, must supervise the implementation of elections according to applicable regulations. On the other hand, Bawaslu must also educate the public about the importance of the community's role in overseeing the implementation of elections. The implementation of the role of these two election officials in political education is found in various programs both funded by the state and in the form of partnerships in the community (Muttaqin & Al-Hamdi, 2023; Ridhuan, 2023).

The approach used in political education determines efforts to improve political literacy. Ideally, the approach must consider socio-cultural aspects and the specific uniqueness of the community targeted by political education. This is because political education's success and public acceptance depend on the substance of information and curriculum in political education and how the content is delivered to the public. Therefore, understanding the socio-cultural reality of the target becomes vital in political education. At this level, the approach used in one place or community differs from that in other communities.

Sambas Regency is one of the unique places in Indonesian political dynamics. First, it is located on the Indonesia-Malaysia border. The geographical condition allows interaction between the people of Sambas Regency and Malaysians through education, marriage, and economy. Wahyuni's study (2017) shows that there are many marriages between Sambas people and Malaysians living in Sarawak. Likewise, cooperation between educational institutions in Sarawak and Sambas led to many educational agendas, such as seminars, conferences, and student exchanges involving universities in Sambas and Sarawak (Risa & Jaelani, 2022). Indirectly, these

interactions expose the people of Sambas Regency to international political dynamics.

Second, the majority of the population of Sambas Regency is Malay. The dominance of the Malay ethnicity colors the socio-cultural reality of the Sambas Regency community, not only in social life but also structurally in local government, where Malay culture and customs often become symbols and policy considerations in the Sambas Regency. Specifically, in this context, the socio-cultural values embraced by the Sambas Malay community are very close to the teachings of Islam. Several studies mentioned that Islam is the cultural identity of the Sambas Malay people (Anwar et al., 2022; Mee, 2010; Ramadhan et al., 2024). At this stage, Islam indirectly influences religious practice and spirituality and various dimensions of life in Sambas Regency, including the political aspect. A study conducted by Nge and Asmadi (2019) found that in the 2019 elections, religion was still one of the significant political preferences for the people of Sambas Regency. The findings show that religion can influence the Sambas Regency society's acceptance of political programs. Therefore, religion, at the same time, can be an effective approach to political education. Therefore, the proper design in integrating religion and political education can be the key to improving political literacy in Sambas Regency.

Using a religious approach in political literacy programs in Sambas Regency can have implications for community acceptance of political education delivered by the KPU and Bawaslu to the community. At the same time, the political knowledge conveyed would be easier to understand because it is related to everyday life. This practice is not new and can be found in various other regions. In Aceh, religious leaders are essential in raising people's political awareness and responsibility (Novriansyah et al., 2024). Likewise, in religious educational institutions such as Pesantren, the integration of political education in the education curriculum has been carried out for a long time and contributed to the emergence of so many politicians in Indonesia (Hermawan & Ngindana, 2020).

Given the unique socio-cultural context of Sambas Regency, this article aims to analyze political education using a religious approach by the General Election Commission (KPU) and the General Election Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu) of Sambas Regency. The study's findings could significantly contribute to the design of public policies, particularly on political education programs by election officials in Indonesia. By portraying the efforts made by election officials in improving political literacy, especially in communities dominated by religious values, this study could provide a valuable academic basis for future policy design.

B. Literature Review

Political education is widely discussed in academic spaces such as seminars, conferences, lecture discussions, and scientific publications. The discussion increases during elections and post-elections. In scientific publications, it is thematically found that studies related to political education in Indonesia have been carried out and can be mapped into three study topics. The first is a study conducted on the topic of forms and strategies for political education. Studies on this topic focus on various practices, strategies, and approaches used in political education in Indonesia. In the context of communication technology, Qibtiyah and Beriansyah (2019) and Satria et al. (2023) found political education practices using social media, especially for young voters. Slightly different, Prasetyo et al. (2022) found political education for young voters with a voluntarism approach. In the context of formal education, Hidayah et al. (2020) found the practice of political education through

integration into the formal education curriculum, especially in civic education subjects. Likewise, Sari (2016) found that political education in educational institutions uses comics.

Second, studies with the topic of actors carrying out political education. Studies with this theme mainly focus on political education in Indonesia, which political parties carry out. These studies show that there are two main targets of political education by political parties, which are the party cadres (Lubis et al., 2024; Rosyid, 2019) and the people in general (Hadi, 2023; Lain, 2023; Munggaran, 2023; Setyarini et al., 2023). However, some studies also find that political education conducted by the General Election Commission (Harnom et al., 2019; Rafni & Suryanef, 2019), the General Election Supervisory Agency (Millah & Dewi, 2021), and community organizations (Sadat, 2022; Suhaimi & Amin, 2022).

Third, studies on the topic of the implications of political education. Studies on this topic highlight the impact of political education on the understanding of democracy in Indonesia. The locus of studies with this theme varies based on age, occupation, and gender. However, these studies uniformly find that political education tends to have positive implications for increasing public participation in Indonesian elections (Alfianda, 2022; Chumaeson, 2020; Hasanah & Sulha, 2023; Pebriyenni et al., 2019; Putri & Mubarak, 2020).

Previous studies above are limited to analyzing political education in general. There is a lack of studies explicitly exploring the relationship between religion and political education. Although there are several studies related to the relationship between religion and politics in Indonesia, such as those conducted by Ronaldo and Darmaiza (2021), Azizah (2023), Farid and Priyatmoko (2020), and Topan and Tianah (2024), these studies focus more on the practice of “take benefit” religion and its instruments to win election contestation in Indonesia. Therefore, this study aims to fill the gap by focusing on political education with a religious approach by election officials in the Sambas Regency.

C. Method

This study is qualitative research with a phenomenological approach. Creswell (2013) and Hamzah (2020) state that the primary research focus with a phenomenological approach is to explore the experiences and meanings of research subjects toward reality. Likewise, in Kuswarno's (2007) view, phenomenological studies analyze social reality according to the subject's views. Departing from these views, the phenomenological approach is considered relevant to use because the focus of this study is to analyze the meaning of the General Election Commission (KPU) and the General Election Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu) of Sambas Regency towards the social reality of the community in Sambas Regency, thus using a religious approach in political education.

Data collection was conducted from March to June 2022 in Sambas Regency. To obtain comprehensive data, the study used observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation to collect data. The informants in this study included six people, consisting of one commissioner of the General Election Commission (KPU) of Sambas Regency, two Democracy Volunteers in religious areas, and three commissioners of the General Election Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu) of Sambas Regency.

The data obtained were then analyzed using the qualitative analysis technique of the Miles and Huberman (2014) model: data reduction, data display, and conclusion.

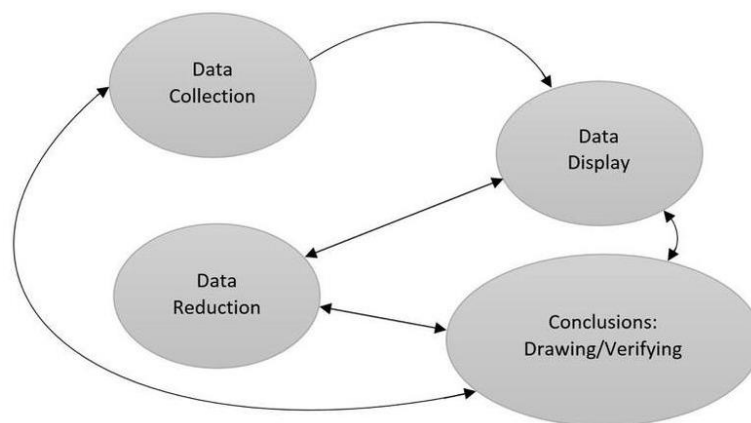


Figure 1. Data Analysis Process

D. Findings

Improving political literacy requires the right approach and strategy. In other words, efforts to improve political literacy programs should pay attention to the accuracy of the approach in implementing the program. In this context, the approach implemented in one community differs from that in others. Many aspects must be considered when determining the approach, such as the economy, socio-cultural realities, and the geographical location of the program targets. At this point, for example, the approach used in rural communities is undoubtedly different from that used in urban communities. Likewise, the approach for exclusive communities is different from the approach for communities that tend to be inclusive. The foresight to see the specific conditions of the target of political education programs will contribute to the success of increasing political literacy.

In this study, the relevance of the approach used in political education is also a concern of the General Election Commission (KPU) and the General Election Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu) of Sambas Regency. Specifically, this study found that both institutions used the religious approach to improve the political literacy of the people of Sambas Regency. The religious approach is essential and effective so that the messages conveyed in political education can be understood and well received. This is as stated by the informant, Mrt, as a commissioner of the General Election Commission of Sambas Regency:

“...Our society is very concerned about Islam and Malay affairs. So, we think explaining elections using a religious approach is very important. Moreover, in Sambas, people are enthusiastic to follow every activity or event related to religion.”

This study found two efforts to implement a religious approach in improving political literacy by the KPU and Bawaslu of Sambas Regency. The first is partnering and involving religious figures and religious institutions in Sambas Regency for various political education programs, both programmatic and incidental. The geographical conditions of Sambas Regency and budget limitations make partnerships and the involvement of religious institutions important so that political education programs can reach all elements of society. The partnership aims to ensure that the parties invited to partner can help provide political education to the community. This is as conveyed by the informant, Mrt, as a commissioner of the General Election Commission of Sambas Regency :

"We also partner with religious organizations and Islamic preachers to educate the public about elections. There is no formal MoU, but we plan to make MoUs with religious universities, such as Nahdatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah. It is just that it has not been implemented for the time being, considering that the election stage has just begun".

The information conveyed by the informant, Mrt, is in line with the information from the informant, Mst, as a commissioner of the General Election Supervisory Agency of Sambas Regency:

"Activities in General Elections Supervisory Agency of Sambas Regency are divided into budgetary and non-budgetary. The budgetary activities have been programmed from the Provincial Bawaslu. For non-budgetary activities, Bawaslu Sambas collaborates with religious figures, including the Indonesian Ulama Council and Islamic preachers."

The partnership and engagement of religious figures and institutions in political education is based on the consideration that the people of Sambas Regency are closely related to Malay and Islamic traditions. At this point, efforts to explain the importance of elections and their contribution to the state's life will be more readily accepted and understood if those who deliver them are religious leaders and supported by religious institutions. In addition, the role of characterization makes it easier to reach the grassroots level in society. This is as stated by the informant, Ik, a commissioner of the General Election Supervisory Agency of Sambas Regency :

"Religious figures have congregations and followers. They understand better how to convey information and knowledge about elections to their congregation. Likewise, the congregation is more listening and obedient to the Ulama. In addition, we engaged religious figures due to considerations of effectiveness and efficiency in socialization. Moreover, the Sambas territory is vast, with 15 sub-districts. With limited Bawaslu personnel, of course, we cannot reach all communities."

The implementation of partnerships and the engagement of institutions and religious leaders is not only done formally based on a cooperation agreement but also through emotional closeness. This is as stated by the informant, YM, a commissioner of the General Election Supervisory Agency of Sambas Regency:

"For us, it is naturally flowing. Because of emotional closeness, so at this time, we always collaborate with the Indonesian Ulama Council, especially its chairman. The target of prevention and supervision in Sambas Bawaslu is money politics, so we often engage the chairman of the Indonesian Ulama Council of Sambas Regency in explaining the adverse impact of money politics on the quality of democracy."



Figure 2. Sambas Regency Election Supervisory Agency event with MUI Chairman



Figure 3. MoU between Bawaslu and Islamic University

In addition to collaborating with Islamic universities, the General Election Commission (KPU) and the General Election Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu) of Sambas Regency also collaborate with the Islamic Student Association (HMI) for political education. The program implemented in this collaboration is the School of Democracy. This is as stated by YM as a commissioner of the General Election Supervisory Agency of Sambas Regency:

"For the Sambas area, we also have a collaboration program with the Sambas Branch of HMI, namely the School of Democracy. The lecturers are from the KPU and Bawaslu, while the participants are students and youth. The purpose of the School of Democracy is not only for participatory supervisory cadres but also to prepare cadres of election officers in the future."



Figure 4. School of democracy activities

The School of Democracy is a collaborative political education program between the General Election Commission (KPU) and the General Election Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu) of Sambas Regency with Islamic student organizations. In the context of the Sambas Regency Election Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu), specifically, it also has a similar program, namely the School of Participatory Supervision Cadres (SKPP), which is carried out in stages starting from the Regency, Province, to the National level. At the level of implementation, the school of democracy and the participatory supervision school are synergistic. Forms of synergy include the participants of the school of democracy being included in selecting participatory supervision schools at the provincial and national levels as representatives of Sambas Regency. In the context of the General Election Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu) of Sambas Regency, the authority to implement the participatory supervision school is only at the basic level. This is as explained by the informant, Ik, a commissioner of the General Election Supervisory Agency of Sambas Regency:

"We also have supervisory cadres and allow them to participate in education at the participatory supervisory school, even tiered from the regency to the national level. Because SKPP is a national program, Sambas only organizes the basic level."

The religious approach by the General Elections Commission (KPU) and the General Elections Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu) in improving people's political literacy does not only focus on personalities or emotional approaches with various elements of society but also uses theological narrative strategies. In this context, the KPU and Bawaslu, with their various institutional tools, directly involve themselves in various community religious activities, both ceremonial and celebrating religious holidays. For example, through democratic volunteers, KPU actively explains to the public the essence of elections and their contribution to the nation's progress. The explanation is presented with a theological narrative to make it easier for the community to understand. This is as stated by ES as a democracy volunteer:

"We already have a routine schedule of safaris every Islamic holy day. Because I am a religious preacher and a democracy volunteer, I specifically discuss politics and elections in Indonesia based on Islamic teachings in several lectures. We also provide a question and answer session so that if there are people who do not understand, they can ask directly. Usually, in the question and answer session, many people ask how to choose a leader in Islam. Likewise, during the Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha sermons, we relate the importance of being critical in choosing leaders."

E. Discussion

The findings of this study underscore the unique role of the ethno-religious reality of the Malay community in Sambas Regency. This reality significantly shapes the use of a religious approach to enhance community political literacy by the General Election Commission (KPU) and the General Election Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu) of Sambas Regency. In this context, religion serves a dual function, bridging the delivery of democratic messages and political education lessons. The community's understanding of the message is facilitated by its relevance to the religious understanding they practice daily.

The findings also show that the strategies and programs implemented to improve people's political literacy are not made haphazardly but are based on an

understanding of the ethno-religious reality that colors various aspects of people's lives in Sambas Regency. In other words, this finding shows the adaptation of official institutions to achieve optimal institutional goals. This is an antithesis to the numerous programs of official institutions that cannot achieve their goals due to the inability to adapt and understand socio-cultural aspects and the needs of the people targeted by the program. Muslim (2017), in his study, found the failure of the poor community empowerment program due to program planning that did not go through studies related to community needs for the program. Likewise, Ariyanto et al. (2023) and Wadu et al. (2021) found resistance to government development programs due to poor communication and threats to the community's cultural heritage.

This study also highlights the active collaboration between election officials and religious institutions in Sambas Regency. The religious approach in political education is implemented through formal partnerships based on emotional ties between election officials and religious institutions. This collaboration is evident in preparing and implementing political literacy programs, demonstrating the practical application of the religious approach.

Ulama and religious institutions in various campaign agendas and government programs are often used as tools to convince the public of the issues campaigned and the programs carried out. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, religious leaders played an essential role in convincing the public regarding vaccinations and various government policies in handling the pandemic (Kinanggi et al., 2022; Mualimin, 2022; Wijesinghe et al., 2022). Likewise, in elections, religious leaders and religious institutions have an essential role in understanding the importance of community political participation and preventing violence in elections (Haerul, 2022; Polinder, 2024; Ticoalu, 2021). In the context of political education in Sambas Regency, the credibility and influence of Ulama and religious institutions contribute to convincing the public and minimizing resistance to political education programs.

The engagement of Ulama and religious institutions in political education in Sambas Regency shows that the two entities are positioned with a dual role. On the one hand, Ulama is positioned as an authoritative source to explain religious doctrines and texts. Likewise, religious institutions are where Muslims institutionalize various movements and fight for their interests in the public sphere. Meanwhile, on the other hand, Ulama and religious institutions function as a means of legitimizing political literacy programs and becoming a mouthpiece in delivering political education materials so that they are more easily accepted and understood by the community. This approach to political education has implications for the quality of democracy because it combines religious and moral authority with political literacy efforts. Consequently, political education with this religious approach provides understanding and campaigns for awareness of political participation and ensures that such participation is based on morality within the framework of Islamic doctrines.

These findings are relevant to what Greg Fealy called "consuming Islam." In Fealy's (2008) view, Islam in Indonesia is not only positioned as a spiritual religion but also a value that is commodified and consumed in various forms, including for political purposes. At this point, Ulama and religious organizations in Indonesia are often used as tools of legitimacy and the formation of public opinion. Fealy's view aligns with previous studies' findings where Islam is capitalized and commodified to achieve various political goals in Indonesia (Effendi et al., 2022; Handoko et al., 2020; Handoko & Suryana, 2023). Therefore, the political education shown by the General

Election Commission (KPU) and the General Election Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu) of Sambas Regency represents a political literacy program in Indonesia that is not just a transfer of political knowledge and understanding but also related to how religion is consumed and practiced in everyday life.

F. Conclusion

Political literacy has a vital role in the quality of democracy in Indonesia. To achieve this political literacy, the right approach is needed in political education, especially by election officials. This study shows that in a dominantly “ethnoreligious” society such as Sambas Regency, religion has a significant role in socio-cultural life, including in understanding, views, and political behavior. Implementing political education with a religious approach includes involving religious institutions such as the Indonesian Ulama Council, Islamic universities, Islamic preachers, and Islamic student organizations in conducting political education. The involvement of Ulama and religious institutions is because they are seen as opinion leaders of Muslims and better understand the exemplary religious narratives in explaining elections and politics to the public. Therefore, it can be concluded that religion not only plays a role in religiosity and spiritual life but is also a value consumed and commodified as a tool to increase a society's understanding and political knowledge. At the practical level, all stakeholders, including the government, religious organizations, and election organizers, should be able to formulate appropriate policies and programs to enlighten the public about politics by utilizing the “power of religion”. The design of these policies and programs must emphasize the aspect of continuity, not only programming to increase the use of voting rights during elections but also to increase public awareness of the importance of politics for the future of their lives. This study is limited to examining the use of religious approaches in improving political literacy at the locus of study, and it is only at the regency level. Therefore, it is recommended that future studies examine a broader locus, such as at the provincial or national level, to provide a more generalizable overview and mapping of the significance of religion in political education in Indonesia.

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