



POLITICAL COMMUNICATION AND ISLAMIC-BASED POLITICAL DIPLOMACY: THE ROLE OF SYEIKH ALI AKBAR MARBUN IN PLURAL SOCIETY OF NORTH SUMATRA, INDONESIA

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how Islamic-based political communication operates as a form of political diplomacy in a pluralistic society, focusing on the case of Syeikh Ali Akbar Marbun in North Sumatra, Indonesia. The study employs a qualitative case study design based on document analysis of twenty-three sources collected between January and June 2024, including religious sermons, institutional publications from Pesantren Al-Kautsar Al-Akbar, biographical narratives, and academic writings discussing the public role of the ulama. The findings show that Syeikh Ali Akbar Marbun acts as a non-state political communicator through ethical and symbolic communication practices such as elite visits (sowan), sermons addressing leadership ethics, and informal consultations with political actors. These communicative practices function as symbolic mechanisms that reinforce moral legitimacy, encourage ethical reflection among political elites, and facilitate dialogue across religious and ethnic boundaries. The novelty of this study lies in conceptualizing ulama as ethical political communicators who perform informal diplomatic functions through symbolic and relational communication practices in plural democratic societies.

Keywords: political communication, Islamic diplomacy, ulama, moral legitimacy, plural society, Indonesia.

1. INTRODUCTION

Political communication in contemporary democracies has undergone significant transformation over the past decades (Bennett & Kneuer, 2024; Klinger et al., 2023). It is no longer monopolized by formal political institutions, electoral actors, or mass media organizations. Instead, political legitimacy and meaning are increasingly

constructed through complex interactions involving non-state actors, civil society organizations, religious leaders, and informal opinion brokers (Ferreira & Nobre, 2024; Indainanto et al., 2023). This transformation reflects broader changes in democratic governance, where declining public trust in formal political institutions has elevated the importance of moral authority, social credibility, and informal communicative networks (Bennett & Kneuer, 2024; Suhendar et al., 2023). Consequently, political communication should not be understood merely as a technical process of transmitting political messages but as a socially embedded practice through which legitimacy, authority, and collective meaning are negotiated.

In plural societies, the dynamics of political communication become even more complex because political messages must navigate sensitive boundaries related to identity, belief systems, and collective memory (Kholil et al., 2024; Wells & Friedland, 2023). Indonesia represents a particularly relevant context for examining these dynamics. As the world's largest Muslim-majority country, with approximately 244 million Muslims within a population exceeding 280 million, Indonesia combines democratic institutions with profound religious, ethnic, and cultural diversity (Hefner, 2023; Ritonga et al., 2023). More than 1,300 ethnic groups and six officially recognized religions coexist within a single political system, creating both opportunities for democratic deliberation and potential risks of political polarization (Hossain, 2024; Purba et al., 2025). Under such conditions, political communication requires not only strategic messaging but also ethical sensitivity and inclusive engagement.

North Sumatra illustrates these dynamics particularly clearly. The province is characterized by significant ethnic diversity, including Batak (Toba, Mandailing, Karo, and Simalungun), Melayu, Nias, Minangkabau, Javanese, and Chinese communities, alongside a multi-religious population consisting of Muslims, Protestants, Catholics, Hindus, Buddhists, and Confucians (Dalimunthe et al., 2024; Harahap et al., 2023). In several districts, Muslims do not constitute an absolute majority, while urban centers such as Medan display particularly high levels of ethnic and religious heterogeneity. This plural configuration makes political communication especially sensitive, as identity-based narratives may easily generate political polarization.

Empirical evidence from Indonesian electoral politics demonstrates that religious symbolism and identity narratives have increasingly shaped political communication

since the post-Reformasi period. Studies of the 2012 Jakarta gubernatorial election, the 2014 and 2019 presidential elections, and various regional elections show that religious identity can function both as a mobilizing force and as a source of political polarization (Hidayah et al., 2025; Weber et al., 2021). In such contexts, religious leaders often emerge as influential communicators who possess the capacity either to escalate identity-based tensions or to mediate social conflict through moral framing and dialogical engagement.

Within Indonesian Islam, ulama occupy a distinctive position as carriers of religious knowledge, moral authority, and social trust. Unlike political elites, whose legitimacy is typically derived from electoral competition or institutional authority, the legitimacy of ulama is rooted in long-term social relationships, religious education, and perceived personal integrity. Previous scholarship has demonstrated that ulama frequently act as intermediaries between political elites and society, particularly in regions where formal political communication lacks emotional resonance or social credibility (Kalia, 2025; Wells & Friedland, 2023). Through sermons, moral guidance, symbolic gestures, and informal networks, religious leaders often shape political attitudes and influence elite behavior.

However, despite growing recognition of the political influence of religious leaders, much of the existing literature still conceptualizes political communication primarily through media systems, electoral campaigns, and institutional actors. As a result, the communicative role of religious authority in shaping political legitimacy and facilitating political diplomacy in plural societies remains insufficiently examined. In particular, limited attention has been given to how religious leaders function as non-state political communicators whose influence operates through moral legitimacy, symbolic communication, and informal networks rather than formal political power.

The case of Syeikh Ali Akbar Marbun provides an important opportunity to address this gap. As a respected Islamic scholar and the founder of Pesantren Al-Kautsar Al-Akbar in Medan, his influence extends beyond religious education into broader social and political networks. Political elites including governors, ministers, presidential candidates, business leaders, and community representatives from both Muslim and non-Muslim backgrounds frequently visit him to seek moral guidance and social legitimacy. These interactions function not merely as ceremonial encounters but as

communicative practices through which ethical validation, political legitimacy, and social trust are negotiated.

Importantly, Syeikh Ali Akbar Marbun's engagement with political actors does not follow conventional patterns of political brokerage or partisan mobilization. He does not hold formal political office, publicly endorse candidates, or participate directly in electoral campaigns. Instead, his influence operates through what may be described as ethical political communication, rooted in Islamic moral principles such as justice ('adl), trustworthiness (amanah), moderation (wasatiyyah), deliberation (shura), and peaceful coexistence (salam). These principles guide his communicative practices and allow him to engage across political and religious boundaries without being perceived as partisan or divisive.

From a theoretical perspective, this case challenges dominant models of political communication that emphasize media systems, campaign strategies, and institutional messaging. While such models remain highly relevant in liberal democracies, they often overlook the role of moral authority, religious discourse, and informal communication networks in shaping political processes, particularly in societies of the Global South. Habermas' (1996) theory of communicative action offers an important analytical lens for understanding how legitimacy may emerge from dialogue and normative reasoning rather than coercion or strategic manipulation (Erbil et al., 2025). In this sense, political communication can function as a form of moral deliberation oriented toward consensus-building and social reconciliation.

Within Islamic political thought, communication is closely connected with ethical responsibility. Communication is understood as an amanah (trust) that must be exercised with honesty, justice, wisdom (hikmah), and accountability. Islamic diplomatic traditions emphasize persuasion over domination, dialogue over confrontation, and moral responsibility over instrumental rationality (Daoudi, 2025; Usman & Abdullah, 2025). These principles suggest that political communication may operate not merely as a strategic instrument but also as an ethical practice aimed at fostering social harmony and collective welfare (maslahah).

Despite the relevance of these perspectives, limited research has systematically examined how Islamic-based political communication operates as a form of political diplomacy within plural democratic societies. This study therefore seeks to address the

following research questions:

- 1) How does Syeikh Ali Akbar Marbun function as a non-state political communicator within the plural society of North Sumatra?
- 2) How do symbolic and ethical communication practices contribute to the construction of political legitimacy and social cohesion?
- 3) How does Islamic-based political communication operate as a form of political diplomacy in plural democratic contexts?

By addressing these questions, this article aims to bridge the gap between political communication theory and Islamic political diplomacy. The novelty of this study lies in its conceptualization of ulama not merely as religious authorities or political brokers, but as ethical political communicators who perform diplomatic functions through informal, symbolic, and relational communication practices. This perspective expands existing political communication scholarship by highlighting the role of moral legitimacy, religious discourse, and cultural context in shaping political diplomacy within Muslim-majority democracies.

2. RESEARCH METHODE

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach to examine Islamic-based political communication and political diplomacy through the role of Syeikh Ali Akbar Marbun in North Sumatra, Indonesia. A qualitative design is appropriate because the research focuses on interpreting meanings, communicative practices, and forms of moral authority embedded in political and religious interactions rather than measuring variables quantitatively (Creswell, 2021). The case study strategy allows an in-depth exploration of complex communicative processes situated within their socio-cultural and political context.

Syeikh Ali Akbar Marbun was purposively selected as the central unit of analysis due to his recognized role as a non-state religious authority who interacts with political elites, government officials, and diverse community groups without occupying formal political office. His position within religious, social, and political networks makes him a relevant case for examining how Islamic-based political communication operates within a plural democratic society.

Data collection was conducted between January and June 2024 through systematic document analysis. A total of twenty-three documents were analyzed, including: (1) sections of an academic dissertation discussing the biography and public role of Syeikh Ali Akbar Marbun, (2) publicly available transcripts and recordings of religious sermons delivered at Pesantren Al-Kautsar Al-Akbar, (3) biographical writings and institutional publications related to the pesantren, and (4) relevant academic literature discussing political communication, Islamic diplomacy, and the role of ulama in Indonesian politics. Document analysis was selected because many communicative practices of religious authorities are preserved in textual and recorded forms, such as sermons, speeches, and institutional narratives, which provide valuable insight into moral discourse and political communication strategies.

To ensure analytical rigor, documents were selected using three criteria: relevance, credibility, and contextual richness. First, documents had to contain explicit references to Syeikh Ali Akbar Marbun's communicative interactions with political actors or discussions of leadership, governance, or social harmony. Second, documents had to originate from credible sources such as academic publications, institutional records, or publicly accessible media materials. Third, documents were selected based on their ability to provide contextual insight into the communicative role of ulama in plural societies.

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the analytical procedures proposed by Byrne (2022). The coding process combined deductive and inductive strategies. Deductive coding was guided by theoretical concepts derived from political communication theory and Islamic political diplomacy, including categories such as moral legitimacy, symbolic communication, dialogical engagement, and religious authority. Inductive coding was used to identify context-specific themes emerging from the documents, particularly patterns of interaction between religious leaders and political elites.

To enhance analytical credibility, the coding process involved peer debriefing and iterative validation. Preliminary coding results were reviewed through discussions with academic peers familiar with qualitative political communication research in order to assess conceptual consistency and interpretive accuracy. This process helped

minimize subjective bias and strengthened the reliability of the analytical interpretation.

Furthermore, the study employed data triangulation by comparing multiple types of documents, including religious discourse, institutional narratives, and scholarly interpretations. Triangulation allowed the researcher to identify converging patterns of communication practices across different sources and contexts. Ethical considerations were also maintained throughout the research process by relying exclusively on publicly available materials, respecting the integrity of religious discourse, and avoiding interpretive misrepresentation of political and religious actors (Muhammad, 2026).

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Ulama as Political Communicators

The findings indicate that Syeikh Ali Akbar Marbun functions as a political communicator whose authority is socially constructed through long-term trust, moral consistency, and inclusive religious discourse. Unlike political actors whose legitimacy is derived from electoral mandates or bureaucratic authority, his influence emerges from sustained public recognition of his religious knowledge, personal integrity, and moral leadership within the community.

Documented accounts from institutional publications and media reports show that Syeikh Ali Akbar Marbun is frequently visited by political figures at both local and national levels. For example, several regional leaders and national political figures have conducted *sowan* (respectful visits) to Pesantren Al-Kautsar Al-Akbar in Medan prior to major political events such as elections or public policy announcements. These visits are typically framed as opportunities for seeking moral advice and spiritual reflection rather than political endorsement. In one sermon delivered during a public religious gathering, Syeikh Ali Akbar Marbun emphasized that political leadership must be grounded in moral responsibility:

“Leadership is not a privilege but an amanah. Anyone who holds authority must remember that power will ultimately be accountable not only before the people but also before God.”

Such statements illustrate how religious discourse functions as a medium for articulating ethical expectations toward political leaders without directly intervening in electoral competition. From the perspective of political communication theory, this type of influence can be understood as moral legitimacy, which enables actors to shape political meaning and behavior without relying on coercive power or institutional enforcement (Aytaç, 2023; Holdo, 2022). Through sermons, informal consultations, and symbolic engagement, Syeikh Ali Akbar Marbun communicates moral narratives that frame governance as an ethical responsibility rather than a purely political contest.

His communication practices also demonstrate a relational model of political communication. Rather than relying on media campaigns or partisan mobilization, interactions with political elites typically occur through interpersonal dialogue, religious gatherings, and private consultations. These forms of communication emphasize trust-building and long-term credibility over short-term political messaging (Amir & Pangkam, 2025).

However, the position of ulama as political communicators is not without complexity. Maintaining a non-partisan stance allows religious leaders to preserve broad social trust, yet it may also create ambiguity regarding their influence in political processes. While Syeikh Ali Akbar Marbun does not publicly endorse candidates, the presence of political elites at religious events may still generate perceptions of symbolic political support. This ambiguity reflects a broader tension in Indonesian politics, where religious authority simultaneously functions as a moral guide and as a symbolic resource for political legitimacy.

Thus, the role of ulama as political communicators should not be understood simply as a stabilizing moral force but also as a communicative position embedded within complex relationships between religion, politics, and public legitimacy.

Symbolic Communication and Moral Legitimacy

Another significant finding concerns the role of symbolic communication in shaping political legitimacy. The communicative practices surrounding Syeikh Ali Akbar Marbun frequently involve symbolic rituals such as elite visits (sowan),

religious sermons, and informal consultations. These activities function not merely as social traditions but as communicative events through which political actors signal moral accountability and social humility.

For instance, several documented visits by political elites to Pesantren Al-Kautsar Al-Akbar have been widely reported in regional media. In these visits, political leaders typically participate in religious gatherings, seek advice from the ulama, and engage in informal dialogue regarding social and political issues. Such encounters are often interpreted by the public as expressions of respect toward religious authority.

From a political communication perspective, these practices illustrate how symbolic interaction contributes to the construction of legitimacy. Bağçeci (2025) argue that political symbols and rituals play a crucial role in stabilizing political authority beyond formal institutional mechanisms. The practice of *sowan* reflects this symbolic dimension by positioning political elites as moral seekers rather than dominant authority figures.

Religious sermons also function as important communicative platforms. During Friday sermons and large religious gatherings, Syeikh Ali Akbar Marbun frequently addresses themes such as justice, leadership ethics, and social responsibility. Rather than issuing explicit political directives, these messages frame governance in terms of universal moral values that resonate with diverse audiences.

In addition to sermons, informal consultations between the ulama and political leaders represent another layer of symbolic communication. These interactions are typically conducted privately and emphasize ethical reflection rather than strategic political negotiation. In Islamic political thought, such exchanges reinforce the concept that leadership constitutes an *amanah* (trust) that must be exercised responsibly.

Nevertheless, symbolic communication may also generate critical questions regarding its political implications. While elite visits to religious authorities may reflect genuine respect for moral guidance, they can also serve strategic purposes by associating political actors with respected religious figures. In such cases, symbolic communication becomes a site where moral legitimacy and political image-building intersect. Therefore, symbolic practices surrounding religious authority should be

understood not only as mechanisms of ethical communication but also as arenas where political legitimacy is negotiated and publicly performed.

Political Communication in a Plural Society

The analysis further demonstrates that Syeikh Ali Akbar Marbun consistently frames political communication using inclusive language and universal moral values that transcend sectarian boundaries. This communicative strategy is particularly significant in North Sumatra, where religious and ethnic diversity creates conditions in which identity-based political narratives can easily generate polarization.

In several sermons addressing community harmony, Syeikh Ali Akbar Marbun emphasizes the importance of mutual respect among different religious groups. In one recorded public lecture, he stated:

“Differences in religion and ethnicity should not divide society. Justice, honesty, and compassion are values shared by all humanity.”

Such statements illustrate how Islamic ethical discourse is articulated in ways that emphasize universal humanitarian principles rather than exclusive religious identity. This communicative approach aligns with the concept of *wasatiyyah* (moderation), which promotes balance, inclusivity, and rejection of extremism in both religious interpretation and political engagement. By framing Islamic teachings as moral guidance for peaceful coexistence, Syeikh Ali Akbar Marbun situates religion as a stabilizing force within democratic pluralism.

However, the effectiveness of such communication strategies should also be evaluated critically. While moral discourse may reduce overt identity-based polarization, structural political competition in Indonesia still encourages the instrumental use of religious symbols during electoral campaigns. Consequently, the influence of religious leaders in moderating political discourse often operates within broader political dynamics that they do not fully control.

Despite these limitations, the communicative practices observed in this case illustrate how religious authority can contribute to democratic resilience by promoting ethical reflection, dialogue, and social responsibility. Rather than

mobilizing religious identity for political competition, Syeikh Ali Akbar Marbun frames religious teachings as moral foundations for civic coexistence.

Overall, the findings suggest that political communication in plural societies requires more than strategic messaging. It depends on communicative actors who possess social credibility and the capacity to articulate shared moral values across diverse communities. In this context, religious leaders may function as important mediators between political authority and social trust, although their influence remains shaped by the broader dynamics of democratic politics.

4. CONCLUSION

This study examined how Islamic-based political communication operates as a form of political diplomacy within a plural democratic society through the case of Syeikh Ali Akbar Marbun in North Sumatra, Indonesia. The findings show that religious leaders can function as non-state political communicators who mediate relations between political elites and society through moral authority, symbolic communication, and dialogical engagement. Rather than relying on formal political power or electoral mobilization, Syeikh Ali Akbar Marbun's influence is rooted in ethical persuasion and social trust, enabling him to communicate across religious, ethnic, and political boundaries within a highly diverse social context.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to political communication scholarship by demonstrating that political legitimacy in plural societies may be constructed not only through media systems and institutional communication but also through informal moral authority and symbolic religious discourse. By integrating political communication theory with the concept of Islamic political diplomacy, this research highlights how ethical principles such as justice ('adl), moderation (wasatiyyah), trust (amanah), and dialogue (shura) can function as communicative resources for mediating political relations and strengthening democratic stability.

In practical terms, the findings suggest that engagement between political institutions and religious leaders can play an important role in maintaining social cohesion in plural societies. Religious authorities who maintain ethical independence from partisan politics may act as moral intermediaries who encourage responsible

leadership and promote inclusive civic values. For policymakers and civil society actors, recognizing the communicative role of religious authority may help support conflict mediation, strengthen public trust, and foster more culturally grounded approaches to democratic governance.

The novelty of this study lies in conceptualizing ulama not merely as religious authorities or political brokers, but as ethical political communicators who perform informal diplomatic functions through symbolic, relational, and moral communication practices within plural democratic societies.

Despite these contributions, the study has several limitations. As a single-case qualitative study, the findings are context-specific and rely primarily on document-based analysis. Future research could expand this perspective by conducting comparative studies of religious political communicators in other regions or by incorporating interviews and field observations to examine how audiences interpret religious-based political communication in contemporary democratic contexts.

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