Legitimation of Religious Symbols in Politics: Descriptive Analysis of The Narration of Indonesian Election Campaign 2019

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Abstract—The presence of religious symbols in the narrative and campaign for the 2019 general election in Indonesia concludes that religion can be a political tool for directing political choices. Religion and symbols are used as vehicles and a way to mobilize the masses to get the votes of voters. As a result, Indonesians are permissive to the phenomenon and are involved in the polarization of identity politics. Democracy, which should be the stage for fighting for ideas, turns into religious legitimacy against political interests. From the private sphere, religion turns into a political strategy in the public sphere. This article discusses and conducts a descriptive analysis of the use of religious narratives and symbols by Indonesian political actors seen from four approaches, namely religiosity, ritual expression, Religion and Public Role and Politics of Identity and Pop Culture. The findings through descriptive literature analysis show that the use of religious symbols is not related to the religious attitude of the Indonesian people and is not part of religious rituals. This attitude arises as an effort to build and carry out identity politics, to gain political interests and not for the interests of religion and religious people.

Keywords: Religion, Political of Identity, Religious Symbol, Indonesian Politics, Election

I. INTRODUCTION

The use of religious symbols in the Indonesian political system seems so prominent in the passing 2019 presidential election. In those political campaigns, political education was ruled out due to the increase of negative campaign (Lazuari, 2018). On campaign stages, politically-laden demonstration dan public meetings, religious figures unashamedly presented political narration utilizing religious symbols. For instance, political contention in DKI Jakarta regional election, according to Azra [1, p. xvii] has become strong evidence of the existence of politic populism practice of (the identity of) religion in the Indonesian democratic system.

This movement has succeeded in proving itself as a political device which then widens its scope of interest and seeking its momentum in the presidential election scene, even though it eventually dispersed or, to be precise, experience fragmentation due to the polarization of support of each candidate. This phenomenon is directing towards the rise of group strength with religious identity. Grafur, as quoted in Kartini (2016, p. 34), concluded that this kind of rising is always identical with rendering religion as a standard of value and a principle in socio-politic life. The utilization of religious symbols became unavoidable, even though the religion itself does not support this behavior. This way of doing politic, not only created sharp polarization in society but is also leading to disintegration, because it has the potential of corrupting pluralism which is the core identity of Indonesian [3]. When it became an instrument of political struggle, religion is transformed to become an instrument of power struggle, which eventually has the potential of disrupting society, wrecking the climate of tolerance, and endangering the unity of the nation [4].

A research study by Haydn-Quindeau about the usage of a religious symbol in the public space in Germany is interesting to observe as comparison material. In Haydn-Quindeau opinion, the symbols can still be retained as long as they guarantee plurality and not being used to unstable the nation's neutrality [5]. The term he used is 'friendly-neutral attitude.' However, what happens in Indonesia is not the same as how the Germans place their religious symbols in public space. The concerns behind the symbols are much more prominent than the meaning and the existence of the symbols themselves. The finding of Bilewicz [6] about the diminishing adverse effects of religious respondents, due to the presence of religious symbols, it cannot even be applied in the Indonesian context. Neutrality is difficult to be maintained because religion has been made into a vehicle of the religious figures themselves. This is just the opposite of the Germans experience who value plurality [7] and clearing religion away from all things that tainted it, as Haydn-Quindeau thesis proposed.

On the contrary, the claim of religious truth was strengthened during the general election political process in Indonesia. What Hasyim has identified is proved (2013, p. 83), that these kinds of claims always give birth to the conviction that other people's religion is not right. The term kafir (infidel or heathen), as one of the trending topic of religious issues of the loudest echo and which is shouted strongly during the general election campaign in Indonesia, which was finally rejected by NU, is solid proof [9].

Based on the above background, it is interesting to examine it as a phenomenon, as to what purpose religious identity is and its symbols emerge and strengthen on the political stage of the 2019 Indonesian elections: Is this a reflection of piety and a form of citizen participation or mass mobilization utilizing identity politics. These questions will be answered in this paper.

II. METHODS

The approach used in this paper is qualitative research with a critical paradigm by utilizing several theories concerning the topics of discussion. The analysis focuses on four main themes that are interrelated with each other and aim to find explanations, and even truths, through a phenomenon, which is the subject of the research. The phenomenon of the use of religion and its symbols in the political arena is first analyzed by using the approach of religiosity and ritual expression. This is important because religion is a part that is closely related to personal beliefs about an immanent and transcendent God. Then the analysis is done by examining whether the phenomenon is related to the public role of religion. The last part is to explore how these symbols emerged as part of popular culture within the framework of identity politics, which turned out to be a metamorphosis of the previous election political strategy. The research conducted by Widyawati in the 2009 election proved that the issue of religion and ethnicity had once been used as a tool for political communication to garner votes from Muslim majority voters [10, pp. 20–30].

III. DISCUSSION

A. Religiosity

In the meantime, it can be concluded that the use of religious symbols in public spaces for political purposes cannot be separated from the expressions of religiosity possessed by the political actors themselves. In his classic work, Glock and Stark (1963) define that religiosity is a conception a person has about the religion he embraces and manifests in daily commitments so that his life will look religious. With Glock and Stark theory, it is seen that religiosity is built inwardly, concerning personal life as a part of a religious community. Ancok quoted Glock and Stark's opinion by describing several indicators of one's spiritual level [12, pp. 126–127], namely ritual involvement, ideological involvement, intellectual involvement, experience involvement, and consequent involvement. In other words, one's piety is not related to his political attitude. If observed, all indicators of the level of religion are not related to one's political choice and attitude. In other words, one's piety is not related to his political attitude.

The recent research conducted by Pepinsky et al. supports this conclusion. In their research which tried to map piety with political choice, it was found that the two variables were not interrelated and did not correlate strongly, especially in public discussions about the fundamental problems of Indonesian economy and politics. Their research concludes that the right relationship between faith and politics in Indonesia (a Muslim-majority country that gives strong support for democracy and the participation of their congregation in public life) is not predicted by individual piety [13, pp. 63–64]. These findings, it can be concluded that the use of religious symbols in election campaigns in Indonesia is not related to the perpetrators' religiosity and not as an expression of spiritualism presented in the public domain.

a. Ritual Expression

The use of religious symbols is related to internal rituals in the religion itself. Through symbols and the implementation of rituals, religious ideas are delivered cognitively and socialized [14], [15]. Naseem prefers to observe more unto religious meaning, in his study of the use of veils among Bangladeshi women, taking them as a representation of the culture and religion of the religion itself [16]. It shows that symbols are always related to rituals that correlate directly with religious practices.

Dhavamony says that rituals in religion show the order of symbols that are made into objects. These symbols express behaviors and feelings that form the personal disposition of devotees, following their respective models [17, p. 174]. Following Dhavamony's thinking, it is clear that symbols are part of rituals. The ritual itself is always carried out in a special ceremony only. The classic work of Mircea Eliade entitled Rites and Symbol of Initiation [18], as quoted by Dhavamony (1995, p. 183) explains more fully the aims and objectives. Rituals cause ontological changes in humans who carry out or live it, so that they experience a transformation from an old situation to a new situation, in this case, the scope of the situation that is considered sacred.

Theoretically, it can be seen that the use of religious symbols cannot be separated from a religious ritual and is typical of it [20]–[23]. Both are closely related to reasons where humans are brought to a higher spiritual level. Based on this understanding, it can be seen that the use of religious symbols in political activities has deviated from the background of the meaning of the symbol itself. The cross, for example, is a potent symbol in Christianity related to the salvation of believers, has deviated from its use in public spaces when it ends on the neck as mere accessories, appearing in a variety of fashions.

Thus it can be concluded that the use of religious symbols in political campaigns is not a ritual expression of the practice of religious teachings. The two entities are separate and not related to each other.

B. Religion and Public Role

If the two theoretical analyzes above cannot explain this phenomenon, then the one logical conclusion is that the use of religious symbols in political campaigns is not at all related to the interests of religion itself. If so, then the question is, what is the reason for using symbols in public space?

Habermas, the German thinker, realized this. In an interview, he said—as quoted by Hardiman—the thoughts of some Western intellectuals about the privatization of religion due to modernization turned out to be inaccurate. In his opinion, even though religion undergoes a process of self-differentiation from several social functions, religion still has a central role as a culture-forming force so that the form of modernity depends on the influence of religion that influences it [24, p. 18].

Borrowing Habermas's thoughts, there is a space opening that provides the role of religion in the public domain. One of them is in democracy. Habermas goes further than pro-secularism Western thinkers. For him, the conscience of religious people is a reflection of religious faith, which can become a critical force against tyrannical power and social injustice. Martin Luther King Jr.'s human right movement is the best example of this thesis. That is why he concluded that

religion and secularity need to be seen in a dialectic relationship.

In his book, Religion in Public Space, Gusti Menoh dissects Habermas's thinking, especially in explaining the ongoing relationship between religion and state in the post-secular realm. One of the theses he put forward was that public deliberation must involve religious groups. In public political space, discourses take place. Religious arguments need to be considered as part of the discourse process but with stipulations, at the same time maintaining the principle of state-law and the legitimacy of the power of the constitutional state. Through this form of communication, the aspirations of religious groups have their place to be heard. A public deliberation process guarantees that religious arguments have their place to be heard and to contribute significantly to a democratic country [25, pp. 127–128].

If this theory is used as a basis for the use of religious symbols in political campaigns, then the supposed dialectical relationship between religion-state (politics) is equal and complementary. The integrity and unity of the country become a frame of the relationship between the two, i.e., not a relationship that attacks or discredits each other. Habermas gives the signs that tyrannical power and social injustice are reasons to be critical. Not to delegitimize the constitutional state and all state administration apparatus. Not to attack government policies nor accuse them of deceit. The phenomenon that occurred in the relationship between religion and state in the election campaign in Indonesia some time ago is the opposite of Habermas's thoughts about the beautiful religion-state relationship. What happened is that religion was presented as a sparring-partner, which is contradictory to the state and the democratic system it operates. The fair general elections are said to be frauded massively and structurally. This narrative is continuously built by figures who carry the name of religion and its symbols narratively. Moreover, all parties should understand that Indonesia is a pluralistic country in its religious belief and not a religious state. Habermas's good desire to include religion as part of 'the public use of reason' [25, p. 163] is practiced in deviation from its original purpose.

Religious psychology explains that these deviations occur because political actors experience abnormalities. Durland & Barlow, as quoted in Saifuddin, said that abnormal conditions are shown through deviant emotional and cognitive behavior. This is related to personal distress conditions that encourage behavior, emotions, and cognitive out of individual social and typical norms [26, p. 175]. This point of view provides a logical explanation of why abnormal behavior, speech, and cognition is shown by political actors who are carrying religion and its symbols in their move. In this situation, the narrative built is based on self-truth, or what is believed to be accurate, even though contrary to facts.

Using a sociological approach of religion, Lubis argues that religion must be positioned and functioned in the locus where it should be. If religion is used as a political vehicle and used as a tool to gain power, then religion will lose its essence [27, p. 137]. This situation gives birth to abnormalities. However, Lubis also gave other choices. If politics supports the goals and substance of religion, the integrative life of the people will be achieved, because everyone will pursue the meaning behind the religious messages delivered. It can be concluded that religious messages born for political purposes have already lost their essence and purity. Political messages reach the public space in the form of religious discourses. Without caution, this behavior will directly be striking religion and state against each other, even horizontally it becomes a potential threat to diversity; relationships that should go along dialectically, beautifully, and harmoniously.

Robert Pringle stated a warning. In his research on Islam in Indonesia, he published a book titled "Understanding Islam in Indonesia: Politics and Diversity." One of his best conclusions is about how the politics of Islam in modern Indonesia should be kept consistent in the variety and diversity of Indonesia [28, p. 183]. Pringle warns [28, p. 195], not to confuse diversity and democracy, a path which everyone can use to legitimate any opinion in public. This includes the use of democracy terminology in utilizing religion to convey political opinions. In other words, Pringle wanted to say that the use of religion for political purposes would only destroy Indonesian diversity which had been painstakingly fought for and maintained by the founding fathers of Indonesia

C. Politics of Identity and Pop Culture

Religion and its symbols are very vulnerable to being a polarization tool to play the politics of identity. Research findings from the University of Indonesia Political Study Center prove this. One reason for the strengthening of identity politics is that the context of the 2019 presidential election is considered to have inherited the sharp political polarization and politicization of identity issues that occurred during the previous 2014 presidential election and the implementation of the 2017 DKI Jakarta governor election. The finding saw an indication to deliberately maintain and foster polarization for political interests in the 2019 election (Puskapol UI, 2019). The presence of media supports this as a source of public information, which is considered to build a tendency to report non-programmatic issues and further highlighting of negative narratives rather than people's political education [29].

In one of his studies, Ariel Heryanto explained this problem in the perspective of popular culture. He agreed that the media played a role and became the main attraction, which could be used as a means of propaganda. The thesis proposed by Heryanto is very operational. According to Heryanto, Indonesians are more sensitive to react to moving images and responding to video cameras over word processing machines [30, p. 281]. That means spoken language, and all visuals rouse their attraction. Heryanto completed his analysis through the phenomenon of the appearance of celebrities (who sang and danced) on the 1999 political stage as evidence of the involvement of media as popular culture. This analysis leads to the conclusion that the appearance through media, is a way of uniting and arousing political ideology into groups that are the target of vote acquisition. Generating ideological sentiments is the tip of the practice of popular culture.

Even though Indonesia is not an Islamic country, it has the potential of religious ideology because it is the country

with the most Islamic population in the world. Through the perspective of popular culture, the use of Islamic symbols at least leads ideological voters to be in the same political flow and agreement. Religious symbols, deliberately displayed visually, created as tools for building populist movements and mass movements. From a perspective of political maturity, Mujani et al. gave a warning about the danger. People take their part in campaigns, not to have political participation but rather as a result of mere mobilization [31, p. 34]. Religious symbols are used as a social identity for political purposes.

Regarding this identity, the tiered formula of Castells is noteworthy [32]. First, the legitimizing identity. This is the stage of group formation in a new meaning through an identity. The group is directed to rationalize the identity that is intended to be internalized by each group member through nodes in the community. Political actors become actors who act as nodes and are tasked with forming the new identity before the public through political narratives wrapped in religion. Second, the stage of resistance identity. When the first stage to equate value is over, a homogeneous group is formed. Group members make opposition efforts and opposing attitudes towards existing power elites and formal institutions. These groups appear in masses intending to present themselves so that other groups recognize their identity (or rather their existence). Massive demonstrations and several mass movements characterize this stage. The third phase is called project identity. In this stage, the actors acting as nodes lead the group to a transformation. The goal is social structure. The method used is to form groups into a populist movement. Djani supported Castells' opinion by quoting the views of Inglehart & Norris, who said that there were two causes for the emergence of the populist movement in the Southeast Asian socio-political system, namely socio-economic inequality and the presence of extreme or radical political ideologies outside the established ideological spectrum [33].

IV. CONCLUSION

In the beginning, populist movements using religious symbols in the political arena were religious movements. The presence of this group seems to legitimize the role of religion in democracy and show the form of citizen participation.

Initially, it became support for democracy and was present as a reinforcement in the existing political system. The symbols of religion are only interpreted as the religious existence of political participants. However, this movement has transformed internally along with psychological involvement and ideological unity. The problem of socio-economic disparities and elements of radicalism as stated by Inglehart & Norris and the formation of resistance as a result of the Project Identity phase proposed by Castells encouraged the original religious groups to morph. The group begins to discuss, discourse, and identify themselves in political alignment. The problem of socio-economic disparities and elements of radicalism as stated by Inglehart & Norris and the formation of resistance as a result of the Project Identity phase put forward by Castells encouraged the original religious groups to morph. The group begins to discuss, discuss, and identify themselves in political

alignment. Eventually, the religious movement was separated from its sacred spirituality and turned into a political movement in the name of religion. The beauty of the relationship between religion and the state as conceptualized by Habermas became damaged. The dialectical relationship between the two turns to be confrontational. Religious narratives are present to legitimize one's self-truth against the state. Accurately Durkheim's argument stated, as cited by Amirudin, that in the life of a dynamic society, the boundaries and relations between the profane [19, p. 87] are something ordinary, general, and part of everyday life, with the holy (something noble, sacred, spiritual and unblemished) often become obscured and blurred.

Nevertheless, religious symbols as "holy" expressions will continue to exist in the "profane" world [34]. That is why, according to Amirudin, sacred religious symbols which originally are found in the boundary of religious ceremonies alone, are now easily found in the reality of politics, in the profane world [35]. This means that as long as maturity in politics is not yet established, political participation will still be mobilized through potential forces in the community. One of them is religion and its symbols.

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