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The dialectics of religion and power: Political communication of NU and Muhammadiyah elites in local electoral politics

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Abstract

Religious organizations occupy a contested position in electoral democracy because institutional neutrality can coexist with communication with political actors. Drawing on Habermas's distinction between communicative and strategic action, this study examines how Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah elites negotiated neutrality, religious authority, and political engagement during the 2024 General Election and Regional Head Election in Banyumas Regency. Using a qualitative case study, data were collected from October 2024 to February 2025 through eight semi-structured interview sessions with nine participants, non-participant observation, and documentary analysis. Data were analyzed through data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing, using communicative and strategic action as analytical categories. The findings show that both organizations avoid partisan endorsement while continuing to communicate with candidates, legislators, and local officials. NU relied on *Kiai*, *pesantren*, religious forums, and culturally embedded relations, whereas Muhammadiyah emphasized organizational structures, public-service institutions, and policy advocacy. Political education, dialogue, and the articulation of aspirations coexisted with legitimacy seeking, institutional networking, and policy access. This coexistence is conceptualized as a dual communicative mode. The study concludes that organizational neutrality regulates rather than eliminates political influence, while transparency, equal access, and clear boundaries between public advocacy and electoral endorsement are necessary to preserve democratic legitimacy.

Keywords: political communication; communicative action; religious authority; Habermas; civil society.

Introduction

Political power frequently intersects with religion, creating relationships that benefit both spheres. As a result, socio-religious organizations exceed doctrinal belief systems and have the capacity to shape moral perspectives, foster social solidarity, and impact public attitudes toward public issues (LeVine & Salvatore, 2005). Democratic politics involves more than the selection of leaders; it also relies on communicative processes that enable society to deliberate on shared interests, form public opinion, and convey demands

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to political institutions. Habermas (1989) conceptualizes the public sphere as a communicative domain that connects society and political power, and democratic legitimacy is achieved when decision-making procedures remain accessible to the reasons and hopes that arise within society (Habermas, 1996). This system identifies religious organizations as significant actors in democracy, but it also spotlights challenges that emerge when moral authority, social influence, and communication with political actors intersect with electoral interests (Gangopadhyay, 2023). Thus, the relationship between religion and power should be viewed as a continuously negotiated process rather than as two entirely separate domains.

Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, the largest socio-religious organizations in Indonesia, occupy a central position in this context. Both organizations maintain comprehensive networks across social, educational, religious, and public service domains (Bush & Fealy, 2014). Notwithstanding differing organizational traditions, both formally distance themselves from partisan politics and refrain from endorsing specific candidates (Hawari et al., 2023). Nevertheless, this formal neutrality does not preclude the socio-political influence exercised by their elites and organizational networks. The authority of *Kiai*, *pesantren*, and cultural relationships enables NU to shape political communication through longstanding social trust (Majid, 2023). Muhammadiyah exerts political influence through its organizational structures, educational institutions, healthcare services, social activities, and policy advocacy (Brown, 2019). Political actors actively seek engagement with both organizations due to their social legitimacy and their capacity to influence public acceptance of candidates and policies. This context highlights the tension between formal neutrality and the exercise of political influence through social and institutional communication.

In Banyumas, NU and Muhammadiyah exert considerable social influence within local communities through their religious and educational networks, healthcare services, social activities, and relationships with local government institutions. The 2024 General Election and Regional Head Election present a critical context for analyzing the exercise of this influence, because heightened political competition has increased candidates' need for social support and public legitimacy. Communication between religious elites and political actors occurred through meetings, consultations, religious forums, policy discussions, and the articulation of public aspirations (Hendriks & Lees-Marshment, 2019). Although these interactions did not always constitute direct electoral support, they were politically significant because they connected candidates and government institutions with organizations deeply integrated into society. This study focuses on

Banyumas Regency, as an arena of local democracy where NU and Muhammadiyah navigate the relationship between organizational neutrality, social responsibility, and communication with political power.

Previous research has examined the relationship between NU, Muhammadiyah, and politics from multiple perspectives. Comparative studies characterize these organizations as Islamic entities with distinct traditions and forms of political engagement, yet both remain influential in Indonesian public life (Hawari et al., 2023; Putera et al., 2026). Research on NU has addressed elite pragmatism, relations with power, the role of kiai, patronage, and network mobilization in political contests (Hidayatullah et al., 2022; Mafudoh et al., 2026; Majid, 2023; Nurdiyansyah, 2021). Studies of political communication have primarily investigated campaign strategies, candidate image construction, the use of religious symbols, and the mobilization of electoral support (Hafid et al., 2024; Widjayanto et al., 2022). While these studies present important insights into the political involvement of religious organizations, they have not sufficiently explained the communicative processes that enable religious elites to maintain institutional neutrality while engaging with candidates and government institutions. The interplay among moral authority, public communication, legitimacy-seeking, and organizational interests in local electoral politics warrants further systematic analysis.

This study applies Habermas's distinction between communicative action and strategic action to analyze these processes. Communicative action seeks mutual understanding through dialogue, the exchange of reasons, and recognition of claims accepted by communication participants. In contrast, strategic action centers on an actor's efforts to influence others' actions or decisions to achieve specific objectives (Habermas, 1984, 1987). This distinction enables analysis of the political communication of NU and Muhammadiyah elites by considering both the forms of their activities and their underlying orientations. Political education, deliberation, public dialogue, and the articulation of aspirations may indicate a communicative orientation, whereas meetings with candidates, network building, program advocacy, legitimacy seeking, and access to policymakers may indicate a strategic orientation. The study introduces the term dual communicative mode to describe the intersection of these orientations in the Banyumas context. This formulation does not seek to extend Habermas's theory, but rather to apply the distinction empirically to the political communication of Islamic community organizations.

This article analyzes the political communication of NU and Muhammadiyah elites during the 2024 General Election and Regional Head Election in Banyumas Regency. The study examines how both organizations maintain institutional neutrality while engaging with candidates, legislators, and local government; how communicative and strategic actions manifest within their communication practices; and how organizational traditions shape their respective political approaches. The article argues that institutional neutrality does not eliminate political influence but instead regulates the boundaries and forms of communication to prevent formal partisan endorsement. In this context, NU and Muhammadiyah exert influence through distinct organizational approaches, and both communicative and strategic orientations may coexist within the same interaction. This article contributes to understanding how religious authority is translated into local political communication without necessarily resulting in electoral endorsement, as well as the potential benefits and risks of this pattern for local democracy.

Literature Review

Political communication facilitates the exchange of information, interests, values, and demands between society and political institutions. This process goes beyond campaigns, media, and official government communication to include social relations that influence public opinion and political legitimacy. Contemporary political communication increasingly occurs through social networks involving diverse actors, rather than being confined to formal institutions (Heryono et al., 2024). Interactions between political leaders and society also take place through informal relationships, enabling elites to gather information, understand citizens' experiences, and assess public demands outside official consultation channels (Hendriks & Lees-Marshment, 2019). The public sphere serves as an arena for deliberating shared concerns and forming public opinion before engaging with the political system (Habermas, 1989). Therefore, democratic legitimacy depends not only on electoral outcomes but also on the transparency and inclusiveness of the processes through which public opinion and will are formed, particularly through publicly justified exchanges of reasons (Habermas, 1996). In the Indonesian context, Zakiyah et al. (2024) similarly associate public discourse with the legitimacy of political power by emphasizing rational, inclusive, and publicly accessible communication. This framework spotlights the role of civil society organizations as essential intermediaries between citizens and political power.

In Indonesia, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah are prominent Islamic civil society organizations that integrate religious life, social services, and the public sphere through extensive organizational networks embedded in society (Brown, 2019).

Both organizations officially maintain a nonpartisan stance, yet continue to exert influence via their elites, institutions, and social networks. NU and Muhammadiyah exhibit distinct patterns of political engagement formed by their respective organizational traditions and structures (Hawari et al., 2023). NU's influence is primarily grounded in the authority of *Kiai* within *pesantren*, religious forums, and cultural relationships closely connected to society. This role positions ulama as both religious authorities and key intermediaries between society and political power, particularly at the local level (Bush & Fealy, 2014). In contrast, Muhammadiyah emphasizes organizational structures, educational and healthcare institutions, social activities, and institutional relationships, while regulating its political engagement through the principles of *khittah* and non-partisanship (Putera et al., 2026). Regardless of these differences, both organizations function as channels for conveying public aspirations and engaging with the government without formal affiliation with political organizations. Their neutral positions illustrate the coexistence of social influence and political significance within socio-religious organizations.

Previous studies on socio-religious organizations and politics have primarily focused on elite behavior, the authority of *Kiai*, patronage, and the utilization of religious networks in electoral contests. Hidayatullah et al. (2022) demonstrate that NU's political position is influenced by elite relationships, organizational interests, and proximity to power. Majid (2023) highlights the importance of *Kiai* as holders of religious and social authority who shape society's political attitudes. Nurdiyansyah (2021) finds that NU networks can facilitate patronage communication and the development of political relationships at the local level. The political actions of NU elites may subsequently affect the political orientations of Nahdliyin voters, although the positions of organizational elites are not always uniformly accepted by members and voters (Mafudoh et al., 2026). Solihin and Mulky (2026) reveal that deviations from *khittah* may blur the distinction between institutional positions and elite interests in local political contests. These studies indicate that the political influence of socio-religious organizations stems not only from formal structures but also from public trust in religious figures and their social networks. However, prior research has largely concentrated on elite behavior, patronage, mobilization, and political positioning, with limited attention to the communicative processes that connect organizational neutrality, the articulation of aspirations, and political interests.

Research on political communication in Indonesian elections has predominantly examined candidate strategies, image construction, the use of religious symbols, media

engagement, and the mobilization of support. For instance, Hafid et al. (2024) analyze political communication strategies employing the *"nyantri"* approach to shape a candidate's image during the 2024 General Election. Similarly, Widjayanto et al. (2022) investigate the use of political communication strategies in electoral campaigns, including identity-based messages, religious appeals, and strategies to counter misinformation. These studies show that religion regularly serves as a source of symbols, language, and legitimacy in candidate communication. Nevertheless, there has been limited focus on religious organizations as communicative actors with distinct interests, institutional boundaries, and social responsibilities. Religious elites are not simply targets of candidate outreach or transmitters of electoral messages; they also act as intermediaries who convey public needs, provide political education, cultivate dialogue, and advocate to the government. This combined role necessitates an analysis that goes beyond campaign communication.

Habermas's theory of communicative action offers a framework for distinguishing the orientations present in political communication. Communicative action aims for mutual understanding through dialogue, the exchange of reasons, mutual recognition among the participants, and the acceptance of claims that can be tested intersubjectively. In contrast, strategic action is oriented toward influencing others' actions or decisions to achieve specific objectives (Habermas, 1984). These two forms of action frequently intersect. For example, dialogue with candidates may simultaneously convey public aspirations and provide political access, build networks, or secure legitimacy. This dynamic phenomenon can also be understood through the distinction between the lifeworld and the system. The lifeworld encompasses the sphere in which values, identities, solidarity, and social trust are formed, while the political system operates through administrative power, institutional mechanisms, and decision-making procedures (Habermas, 1987; Hariyanto, 2022). Religious organizations occupy an intermediary position among these domains, being embedded in social life while also interacting with political institutions.

Research on NU and Muhammadiyah has examined their organizational traditions, social authority, elite involvement, patronage, and contributions to public life (Brown, 2019; Hawari et al., 2023; Hidayatullah et al., 2022). Studies on political communication have also addressed candidate strategies, the use of religious symbols, image construction, and electoral mobilization (Hafid et al., 2024; Widjayanto et al., 2022). However, these studies have not sufficiently explored how NU and Muhammadiyah elites maintain institutional neutrality while engaging with candidates, legislators, and local governments

in local electoral politics. The relationship among moral authority, the articulation of aspirations, legitimacy seeking, policy advocacy, and organizational interests has rarely been studied through the lens of communicative and strategic action. This study approaches this gap by applying both forms of action as analytical categories in the context of the General Election and the Regional Head Election in Banyumas. The concept of dual communicative mode is introduced to explain the coexistence of communicative and strategic orientations within a single interaction.

Method

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to examine the political communication practices of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah elites in Banyumas Regency, Central Java, during the 2024 General Election and Regional Head Election. The case study design was selected because the research sought to understand how religious elites, political actors, and local government officials interpreted and negotiated institutional neutrality, moral authority, and political engagement within a specific local democratic context. Fieldwork was conducted from October 2024 to February 2025, with retrospective data on the 2024 General Election assembled through interviews and documentary materials, while data concerning the Regional Head Election were collected during the electoral period and its immediate aftermath. Banyumas was selected purposively because NU and Muhammadiyah have extensive organizational networks and substantial religious and social influence within the region.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their organizational positions, involvement in electoral communication, and knowledge of local political interactions. The study involved nine participants interviewed in eight sessions, including one joint interview with two representatives of Muhammadiyah's Institute for Law and Public Policy Advocacy (LHKP). As presented in Table 1, the participants represented religious organizations, local political institutions, electoral actors, and academia. To protect their identities and secure consistent reporting, participants are identified by initials throughout the article. The comparison between NU and Muhammadiyah was conducted analytically to identify differences in organizational communication behaviors rather than to produce a statistically representative comparison of the two organizations.

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, non-participant observation, and documentary analysis. The eight interview sessions lasted approximately 60–90 minutes and were conducted face-to-face at locations agreed upon with the participants. With the participants' permission, the interviews were audio-recorded and

transcribed verbatim. Documentary materials included organizational documents, public statements, electoral regulations, and relevant news reports concerning the 2024 General Election and Regional Head Election. These materials were used to contextualize the interview accounts and to examine the consistency between organizational positions, public statements, and reported political communication practices.

Table 1
Research Participants

Participant	Institutional Affiliation or Position	Participant Category	Interview Session
IH	Chairperson of PCNU Banyumas	Nahdlatul Ulama leader	Individual
DJ	Chairperson of PDM Muhammadiyah Banyumas	Muhammadiyah leader	Individual
FZ	Representative of Muhammadiyah's Institute for Law and Public Policy Advocacy (LHKP) Banyumas	Muhammadiyah organizational actor	Joint
SPA	Representative of Muhammadiyah's Institute for Law and Public Policy Advocacy (LHKP) Banyumas	Muhammadiyah organizational actor	Joint
SB	Chairperson of the Banyumas Regional House of Representatives	Local government and political actor	Individual
AH	Vice Chairperson of the Banyumas Regional House of Representatives	Local government and political actor	Individual
RI	Prospective regional head candidate	Electoral actor	Individual
AA	Chairperson of Team 7	Electoral and campaign actor	Individual
LM	Academic at Jenderal Soedirman University	Academic and local political observer	Individual

Note. Nine participants were interviewed in eight sessions. Table processed by authors, 2026.

Data analysis followed the interactive process proposed by Miles et al. (2014), comprising data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Interview transcripts, field notes, and documentary materials were repeatedly read and coded to identify repeated issues related to institutional neutrality, moral authority, political education, dialogue, candidate interaction, policy advocacy, organizational networking, legitimacy-seeking, and access to policymaking. The initial codes were grouped into more comprehensive analytical categories and compared across NU, Muhammadiyah, political, governmental, and academic perspectives. These categories were then interpreted using Habermas's distinction between communicative action and strategic action. Communicative action was identified through dialogue, deliberation, political education, moral persuasion, consensus-oriented communication, and the

articulation of public interests. Strategic action was identified through candidate visits, informal negotiations, policy advocacy, legitimacy-seeking, organizational networking, and efforts to secure access to decision-making.

The credibility of the findings was strengthened through source and methodological triangulation. Interview accounts were compared across religious leaders, political actors, government officials, and academics, and were examined alongside observational and documentary data. Member checking was also conducted with selected participants to confirm the accuracy of the researchers' interpretations. Ethical principles were maintained by gaining informed consent before each interview. Participants were informed about the objectives of the research, the voluntary nature of their participation, and the use of the collected data. To protect confidentiality, all participants are identified by initials throughout the article. The research materials were securely stored and used exclusively for academic purposes.

Results and Discussion

The Dialectic of Religion and Power in Local Electoral Politics

The findings indicate that the relationship between religion and power in Banyumas involved the simultaneous maintenance of institutional neutrality and active political engagement. Accounts from participants regarding the 2024 General Election and Regional Head Election reveal that both NU and Muhammadiyah formally refrained from endorsing specific candidates, while continuing to interact with electoral and governmental actors. These communications addressed matters such as religious affairs, education, healthcare, social welfare, community development, and articulating public aspirations. Participants distinguished between communication with candidates and direct institutional involvement in practical politics. Consequently, neutrality did not require withdrawal from the electoral process; instead, it established a clear distinction between formal partisan support and communication deemed necessary for representing community interests. This pattern was reflected in the statements of both religious leaders and electoral actors, with each organization articulating its engagement in line with distinct institutional aims.

Within NU, institutional neutrality was reflected through adherence to the *Khittah* NU 1926. According to IH, the Chairperson of PCNU Banyumas, NU refrained from formally supporting any candidate but maintained communication with all candidates to ensure that community concerns were conveyed:

> *"NU continues to adhere to the Khittah 1926 and therefore does not institutionally support any candidate. However, communication with all candidates is still necessary so that community aspirations might be conveyed to prospective regional leaders"* (IH, personal communication, January 17, 2025).

The informant's (IH) statement indicates that NU differentiated between organizational endorsement and communication with political actors. The organization kept formal distance from electoral competition while continuing to address issues related to religious life, education, and communal welfare. This communication was viewed as part of NU's responsibility to its members and to the broader public, rather than as an attempt to mobilize electoral support.

Muhammadiyah adopted a comparable position, emphasizing its allegiance to organizational nonpartisanship. According to DJ, the Chairperson of PDM Muhammadiyah Banyumas, Muhammadiyah did not participate in practical politics or formally endorse any candidate but remained open to communication with actors who demonstrated concern for public services: *"Muhammadiyah is not involved in practical politics and does not support any candidate. However, we are still open to communication with anyone who displays a commitment to public service, education, and healthcare"* (DJ, personal communication, February 10, 2025). The informant's (DJ) statement suggests that Muhammadiyah evaluated political communication based on the public commitments demonstrated by political actors. Education, healthcare, public services, and community empowerment were the main issues justifying such communication. Political engagement was therefore framed to protect social-service interests and convey public needs, without formally affiliating the organization with any candidate.

The perspectives of electoral actors confirmed that communication with NU and Muhammadiyah retained political significance despite their formal neutrality. The informant (RI), a prospective regional head candidate, observed that engagement with leaders of both organizations was important because they possessed strong social legitimacy and represented influential constituencies in Banyumas (RI, personal communication, February 10, 2025). Their religious authority, organizational networks, and established relationships with local communities positioned them as important interlocutors during electoral competition. Political actors interacted with these organizations not only because of their potential influence but also because they could articulate concerns that were not always addressed through formal political institutions. Such communication enabled candidates to understand public expectations and establish relationships with socially trusted organizations. However, the informant's (RI) information did not indicate that communication automatically resulted in explicit

organizational endorsement. The political significance of NU and Muhammadiyah rested instead on their capacity to facilitate communication between electoral actors and local society.

The findings indicate that the interaction between religion and power was identified by a negotiated relationship rather than direct organizational participation in electoral competition. Both NU and Muhammadiyah maintained formal neutrality while continuing to communicate with candidates, government officials, and other political actors. NU prioritized religious affairs, education, and communal welfare, whereas Muhammadiyah emphasized education, healthcare, public services, and community empowerment. These differentiations reflected their respective organizational focuses, yet both organizations maintained a clear separation between partisan endorsement and engagement focused on public interests. Institutional neutrality functioned as a formal boundary for political involvement, while communication was considered acceptable when conducted in an open, nonpartisan manner centered on public concerns. The dialectic of religion and power was thus evident in the sustained effect of religious organizations within local politics, despite their formal refusal to act as partisan electoral actors.

Political Communication Patterns of NU and Muhammadiyah Elites

The findings show that NU and Muhammadiyah elites engaged with political actors through channels guided by their respective organizational traditions. NU relied on culturally embedded religious networks, while Muhammadiyah emphasized formal institutions and public-service structures. These organizational differences influenced the participants, the communication contexts, and the issues presented to political and governmental officials. Although these distinctions exist, both organizations served a comparable intermediary role by linking community concerns to political institutions. Their communication was not structured as formal electoral campaigning; instead, it developed through religious, social, educational, and institutional relationships established prior to the electoral period. Consequently, the political communication behaviors of both organizations were based on pre-existing relationships with local communities, rather than being created solely for the 2024 electoral contests.

NU's political communication operated through *Kiai*, *pesantren* networks, religious gatherings, organizational meetings, and personal relationships. *Kiai* and *pesantren* figures occupied significant positions due to their religious authority and close relationships with local communities, enabling them to convey public concerns to

political actors. Religious gatherings and community meetings served as forums for discussing social problems, local development needs, and expectations of prospective leaders without framing these discussions as formal campaign activities. Communication through these channels emphasized religious guidance, communal welfare, cultural persuasion, and direct dialogue. This approach permitted NU elites to maintain close interaction with society while articulating community aspirations to candidates and government officials. The influence of NU was therefore closely associated with the social trust vested in religious figures and the extensive community networks surrounding *pesantren* and local religious activities.

Muhammadiyah developed its political communication through a more institutional structure, involving PDM, the Institute for Law and Public Policy Advocacy (LHKP), educational institutions, healthcare services, and community empowerment programs. Communication with political and governmental actors was more frequently associated with public-service issues, institutional consultation, and policy advocacy. Schools, healthcare institutions, and organizational units enabled Muhammadiyah to identify social needs and translate them into policy concerns. Two informants, FZ and SPA, representatives of LHKP Muhammadiyah Banyumas, described the role of institutional advocacy in this communication:

> *"LHKP Muhammadiyah functions as a platform for policy advocacy that encourages communication between the government and society. We are not involved in practical politics or in supporting any candidate, but we seek to provide input on public policies so that they remain oriented toward public interests, transparency, and democratic standards"* (FZ and SPA, personal communication, December 17, 2024).

The two informants, FZ and SPA, demonstrate that LHKP functioned as an institutional channel for communicating public aspirations and providing recommendations to government actors. Muhammadiyah's engagement exceeded the electoral period, encompassing education, healthcare, public services, transparency, and community empowerment. Political communication was therefore conducted through organizational advocacy instead of direct involvement in candidate mobilization. The comparison in Table 2 indicates that organizational structure influenced the form of political dialogue more distinctly than its general purpose. NU's communication was more closely associated with interpersonal relations, religious authority, and cultural legitimacy, while Muhammadiyah's communication was more strongly organized through institutional cooperation, professional networks, and policy advocacy. This distinction does not imply that NU lacked formal organizational channels or that

Muhammadiyah relied exclusively on organizational messaging; rather, it spotlights the channels most prominent in the research data. Both organizations used their respective networks to communicate public concerns, maintain relations with political institutions, and preserve their positions as nonpartisan religious organizations. The differences between them, therefore, concerned the way communication was conducted rather than their continued involvement in local political processes.

Table 2

Political Communication Patterns of NU and Muhammadiyah Elites

Dimension	Nahdlatul Ulama	Muhammadiyah	Comparative Meaning
Basis of communication	Religious authority and culturally embedded community relationships	Organizational authority and public-service institutions	Both organizations draw political relevance from established social legitimacy
Principal channels	*Kiai*, *pesantren*, religious gatherings, organizational meetings, and personal networks	PDM, LHKP, educational institutions, healthcare services, and community forums	Organizational traditions shape the channels through which political communication occurs
Key actors	PCNU leaders, *Kiai*, and *pesantren* figures	PDM leaders, LHKP representatives, and education and healthcare actors	Religious and organizational elites serve as intermediaries between society and political institutions
Dominant form of communication	Cultural persuasion, religious guidance, community dialogue, and musyawarah	Institutional consultation, policy advocacy, public discussion, and professional networking	NU emphasizes culturally embedded interaction, while Muhammadiyah emphasizes institutional engagement
Main issues articulated	Religious affairs, education, community welfare, and local social concerns	Education, healthcare, public services, transparency, and community empowerment	Both communicate issues understood as public rather than partisan interests
Relationship with political actors	Interpersonal communication and consultation through religious and community networks	Institutional dialogue and policy-oriented communication	Both maintain engagement without formally acting as campaign organizations
Primary purpose	Conveying community aspirations and maintaining social relationships	Strengthening public services and improving policy responsiveness	Different channels support a similar intermediary role

Note. Authors' analysis of research data.

The findings also indicate that political communication reached past direct interaction between organizational leaders and electoral candidates. NU and Muhammadiyah utilized broader religious, educational, healthcare, and community networks to connect organizational elites with citizens and public institutions. These networks facilitated the movement of social concerns from community settings into communication with candidates, legislators, and government officials. NU relied more visibly on religious figures and culturally rooted relationships, whereas Muhammadiyah employed institutional structures to formulate and advocate public-service concerns. Both approaches positioned religious organizations as communication channels between society and political institutions without requiring formal participation in partisan electoral competition.

Communicative and Strategic Action in Religious Elite Political Communication

The findings show that political communication involving NU and Muhammadiyah elites included both communicative and strategic orientations. Communicative action was reflected in efforts to convey community concerns, facilitate dialogue, provide political education, and encourage shared understandings of public needs. Strategic action was clear in communication intended to build relationships with influential actors, secure policy access, strengthen organizational networks, and increase social legitimacy. These orientations often overlapped within the same activities. Candidate meetings, institutional consultations, policy advocacy, and communication with government officials frequently enabled discussion of public interests while simultaneously promoting the practical objectives of the actors involved. Therefore, the distinction between communicative and strategic action was determined by the dominant orientation of communication rather than by a strict separation of activities.

The strategic dimension was most clearly articulated by electoral actors, who identified religious organizations as influential social networks. According to informant AA, communication with NU and Muhammadiyah leaders constituted a significant element of political strategy due to the substantial public trust both organizations command:

> *"Communication with NU and Muhammadiyah figures is an important part of political strategy because they enjoy a high level of trust within society. Through such communication, prospective regional leaders can better understand community aspirations while building positive relationships with religious organizations without directly requesting political support"* (AA, personal communication, October 24, 2024).

The informant AA demonstrates that communication with religious elites served multiple purposes. It enabled electoral actors to develop relationships with organizations that have extensive community networks and considerable social legitimacy. Simultaneously, this communication provided opportunities to identify public concerns and understand expectations directed toward prospective regional leaders. This interaction combined efforts to expand political relationships with a pledge to address community aspirations. Instead of making explicit requests for organizational endorsement, political actors aimed to establish trust without requiring NU or Muhammadiyah to formally support a specific candidate.

Communication between religious organizations and governmental institutions also exhibited both communicative and strategic components. The informant SB described religious organizations as important intermediaries between government and society: *"Religious organizations have a strategic position because they function as a bridge between the government and society"* (SB, personal communication, February 10, 2025). This intermediary role involved conveying concerns that were not always communicated through formal governmental channels. Communication with religious elites enabled public officials to access information about educational, religious, social, and communal welfare issues, while allowing NU and Muhammadiyah to introduce these concerns into policy discussions. These communications reflected a communicative orientation through enabling the articulation of public needs and dialogue between society and government. They also exhibited a strategic orientation, as access to public officials enabled religious organizations to advocate for organizational programs and influence policy priorities. SB's account illustrates how intermediary communication can simultaneously support public representation and strengthen institutional relationships.

AH also regarded NU and Muhammadiyah as partners of the local government in communicating community aspirations and preserving social stability throughout the Regional Head Election period. According to AH, interaction with both organizations enabled government officials to understand community needs and sustain a beneficial social environment throughout the election period (AH, personal communication, January 17, 2025). This account indicates that communication reached beyond policy advocacy or electoral interests. It also involved coordination among governmental and religious institutions during a politically sensitive period. The communication promoted the exchange of information about public concerns and simultaneously strengthened cooperation among organizations whose institutional interests included social stability, public trust, and effective local governance.

The communicative dimension was also apparent in political education, public dialogue, and the promotion of nonpartisan electoral considerations. LM noted that religious elites facilitated discussions, provided political education, and encouraged citizens to evaluate candidates based on public interests rather than only on partisan affiliations (LM, personal communication, February 8, 2025). These activities aimed to develop political understanding and enable citizens to evaluate electoral choices in light of social and public considerations. Although the study did not directly measure changes in voter attitudes, LM's account identified political education and dialogue as recurring functions performed by religious elites during the electoral period. These practices differed from candidate-oriented mobilization by stressing the dissemination of information, public reflection, and the communication of moral considerations within local communities.

Table 3

Empirical Manifestations of Communicative and Strategic Action

Empirical practice	Communicative orientation	Strategic orientation	Supporting evidence
Political education	✓	—	Interviews and organizational communication concerning informed electoral participation
Religious and community dialogue	✓	—	Communication through religious and community networks
Articulation of community aspirations	✓	✓	Interviews with religious, electoral, and governmental actors
Consultation with candidates	✓	✓	Interviews with NU and Muhammadiyah leaders and RI
Candidate meetings	—	✓	Interview with AA
Policy advocacy	✓	✓	Joint interview with FZ and SPA
Organizational networking	—	✓	Interviews with organizational and electoral actors
Public discussion and consultation	✓	✓	Interview and observational data
Communication with government institutions	✓	✓	Interviews with SB and AH
Political legitimacy seeking	—	✓	Interviews with RI and AA

Note. Authors' analysis of interview, observational, and documentary data.

Table 3 indicates that several activities could not be classified exclusively as communicative or strategic. Political education and religious dialogue were primarily communicative, designed to inform citizens and encourage understanding. Candidate meetings and legitimacy seeking were primarily strategic because they enabled political actors to establish relationships with socially influential organizations. Community consultation, policy advocacy, public discussion, and communication with government institutions exhibited both orientations. These activities allowed participants to discuss public concerns and pursue access, cooperation, legitimacy, or policy influence. The findings show that communicative and strategic action operated concurrently in the political communication of religious elites, although their relative prominence varied across actors, issues, and settings.

The results show that the political communication of religious elites was neither exclusively deliberative nor completely interest-driven. Communication oriented toward public understanding could also create opportunities for institutional influence, while intentionally motivated interaction could still transmit community concerns. NU and Muhammadiyah employed dialogue, political education, consultation, and advocacy to represent public interests, whereas electoral and governmental actors engaged with both organizations because of their extensive networks and social legitimacy.

Negotiating Neutrality, Religious Authority, and Political Engagement

The political communication of NU and Muhammadiyah elites in Banyumas is characterized by three interrelated patterns. Institutional neutrality serves as a boundary against organizational support for candidates, yet it does not prevent ongoing communication with prospective regional heads, legislators, and local government officials. The two organizations adopt distinct approaches aligned with their institutional characteristics. NU relies on *Kiai*, *pesantren*, religious forums, and community-based social relations, while Muhammadiyah emphasizes organizational structures, educational institutions, healthcare services, and policy advocacy through LHKP. Both organizations aim to represent public interests while maintaining relationships with political institutions. This finding supports previous research that identifies NU and Muhammadiyah as Islamic community organizations that retain significant influence in political life, even as they formally distance themselves from partisan politics (Hawari et al., 2023). The present study contributes by elucidating how such influence is exercised through communication practices in local electoral politics.

Neutrality does not imply that religious organizations are absent from the political sphere. Rather, this stance constitutes an institutional principle that delineates the boundaries, forms, and purposes of political engagement. The *Khittah* NU 1926 and Muhammadiyah's nonpartisan position restrict formal endorsement, organizational mobilization, and the use of institutional identity to support specific candidates. However, these boundaries still permit dialogue, consultation, the articulation of aspirations, and advocacy for public interests. This finding offers a more nuanced explanation than studies that focus solely on the pragmatism of NU elites, their relationships with political actors, and patronage communication in local elections (Hidayatullah et al., 2022; Nurdiyansyah, 2021). The political stances of NU and Muhammadiyah in Banyumas illustrate that neutrality and political influence can coexist in distinct domains. While neutrality governs the formal organizational position, social and religious authority enables elites to maintain communication with political actors. The credibility of this neutral stance is at risk when repeated meetings, symbolic proximity, or privileged access to candidates are perceived by the public as covert endorsement. Consequently, neutrality must be demonstrated through transparent, consistent actions rather than solely through official statements.

Habermas's distinction between communicative action and strategic action provides a framework for understanding the dual orientations present in these interactions. Communicative action seeks mutual understanding through the exchange of reasons, mutual recognition among participants, and the evaluation of claims that can be accepted intersubjectively. In contrast, strategic action is directed toward achieving specific objectives by influencing the decisions or actions of others (Habermas, 1984). The data from this study indicate that public dialogue, political education, deliberation, and the articulation of aspirations align more closely with a communicative orientation. Conversely, meetings with candidates, network building, legitimacy seeking, program advocacy, and access to policymakers reflect a strategic orientation. Both orientations may coexist within a single interaction, though they are not identical. For instance, a meeting between a candidate and religious elites may simultaneously provide a platform to express community needs and help the candidate establish connections with socially legitimate networks. The concept of a dual communicative mode is introduced to explain this convergence, serving as an analytical formulation specific to the Banyumas context. This concept illustrates the empirical relationship between mutual understanding and the pursuit of interests in the political communication of religious organizations.

The distinction between communication oriented toward public interests and communication directed toward institutional access can be further analyzed using Habermas's concepts of the lifeworld and the system. The lifeworld encompasses the sphere where meaning, solidarity, identity, and mutual understanding are established, whereas the political system operates through administrative power, institutional mechanisms, and decision-making interests (Habermas, 1987). Networks of *pesantren*, religious gatherings, schools, hospitals, and social activities embed NU and Muhammadiyah within the lifeworld of Banyumas society. This proximity fosters social trust, which is valuable to both candidates and government officials. Communication with political institutions channels aspirations formed in social spaces into policy processes, but also introduces the potential for power dynamics to affect religious relationships. Organizational traditions influence how this process unfolds. NU's authority is primarily expressed through *Kiai*, *pesantren*, and cultural proximity, consistent with *Kiai's* role as holders of religious and social authority in Indonesian politics (Majid, 2023). Muhammadiyah more frequently translates social needs into institutional agendas through education, healthcare, public services, and advocacy. These differing approaches do not suggest that one organization is inherently more communicative or strategic than the other, as both orientations can operate within cultural and institutional networks.

This finding extends previous research that has focused on the involvement of religious organizations through elite behavior, relationships with political parties, patronage, voter mobilization, or broader contributions to democracy. Studies on NU's political pragmatism reveal that organizational interests and elite relationships can shape its political stance, while research on patronage in regional elections highlights the significance of NU networks for local political communication and mobilization (Hidayatullah et al., 2022; Nurdiyansyah, 2021). Comparative analyses of NU and Muhammadiyah underscore differences in their structures, traditions, and modes of engagement in Indonesian political life (Hawari et al., 2023). Rather than contradicting these findings, the present study shifts the focus to the communicative processes that link religious authority, organizational neutrality, and political interests.

Religious authority attains political relevance through interpersonal trust, consultation, the articulation of aspirations, policy advocacy, and symbolic access to organizational networks. A comparable, although institutionally different, pattern appears in the Indonesian Ulama Council, whose authority in public health and national lottery debates illustrates the continuing intersection between religious authority and

state policy (Budiwanti & Eidhamar, 2026). In the present study, however, this relationship is expressed through NU's mass-based religious networks and Muhammadiyah's educational, healthcare, public-service, and policy-advocacy institutions. The dual communicative mode accounts for why organizations that formally reject partisan endorsement continue to attract political actors and maintain communication with government entities. This formulation is context-specific and should not be generalized to all branches of NU and Muhammadiyah, as patterns of elite relations, organizational structures, and electoral dynamics may vary across regions.

The democratic implications of these communication practices require critical and proportionate analysis. NU and Muhammadiyah networks possess the potential to create public spheres where issues such as education, healthcare, religion, and welfare are discussed independently of party structures. According to Habermas, the public sphere is not simply a gathering place, but a communicative arena where shared concerns are debated, and public opinion is shaped through the exchange of reasons (Habermas, 1989). Setiawan (2023) examines social media as a Habermasian public sphere. The present findings extend this perspective by showing that religious forums, pesantren networks, public-service institutions, and direct meetings with political actors also function as arenas of public communication. The public sphere in local electoral politics is therefore not limited to digital platforms or formal deliberative institutions but is also embedded in religious, cultural, and organizational relationships.

Democratic legitimacy arises not only from electoral outcomes, but also from the interplay between public communication, opinion formation, and decision-making processes that remain accessible to public reasoning (Habermas, 1996). The practices of NU and Muhammadiyah in Banyumas can foster these conditions when communication is open, non-coercive, provides equal access, and prioritizes public interests. However, the same religious authority may also result in unequal influence, symbolic endorsement, exclusive elite negotiations, moral pressure on voters, or doubts about organizational independence. The predominance of elite informants in this study limits the ability to assess grassroots perspectives on such communication. Consequently, the findings suggest potential for local deliberation rather than definitive evidence of democratic consolidation. Ensuring transparency in meetings, equal access for candidates, and a clear distinction between public aspirations and electoral endorsement is essential to maintain organizational legitimacy.

Conclusion

During the 2024 General Election and Regional Head Election in Banyumas Regency, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah elites consistently maintained institutional neutrality while actively cooperating with political actors, government institutions, and local communities through political communication. Rather than functioning as partisan political organizations, NU and Muhammadiyah positioned themselves as civil society actors supporting dialogue, representing public aspirations, promoting political education, and encouraging democratic participation. As a result, political communication performs both as a mechanism for strengthening democratic leadership and as an instrument for integrating religious, educational, and social concerns into local policymaking.

This study elaborates Habermas's Theory of Communicative Action by demonstrating that communicative action and strategic action coexist within the political communication practices of Islamic civil society organizations. Communicative action is reflected in political education, dialogue, deliberation, and moral persuasion, whereas strategic action is manifested in policy advocacy, institutional networking, organizational representation, and communication with political actors. Rather than constituting contradictory orientations, these two forms of communication operate in complementary ways, enabling religious organizations to maintain institutional neutrality while remaining politically relevant. The concept of a dual communicative mode is introduced to describe the simultaneous operation of communicative and strategic action in the political communication of religious elites within local democratic leadership.

The results add to wider discussions of religion and democracy by demonstrating that the political effect of religious organizations stems from moral legitimacy, social trust, and organizational credibility, rather than from formal political authority. This suggests that Islamic civil society organizations continue to play a significant democratic role as intermediaries connecting citizens with political institutions. The study also stresses the importance of sustained organizational adherence to transparency, neutrality, and accountability to prevent political communication from being perceived as implicit political endorsement or institutional partisanship. Therefore, the democratic contribution of religious organizations depends not only on their participation in public communication but also on their ability to sustain public trust while engaging constructively with political actors.

Although these contributions are significant, this study has several limitations. The study was conducted as a qualitative case study focused exclusively on Banyumas

Regency; therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to all regions of Indonesia, where social and political conditions and organizational characteristics may differ significantly. Additionally, the study primarily examined the perspectives of religious leaders, political actors, and academics, while the perceptions of grassroots members and ordinary citizens were not explored in depth. Future studies should consider comparative studies across multiple regions, incorporate quantitative or mixed-methods approaches, and examine how grassroots communities analyze and respond to political communication from religious organizations. Such investigations would advance scholarly understanding of the developing relationship between religion, political communication, and democratic leadership in contemporary Indonesia.

Author Contribution Statement

Author contributions to this article: Turhamun contributed as the initiator and drafter of the article, as well as the data analyst and interpreter; Siti Nurmahyati contributed as a validator of the data and analysis results, collected the data, and critically revised the article. All authors agree to be accountable for all aspects of this work.

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