Actualization of *Uswatun Hasanah* as a Framework for Islamic Moderation Against Religious Politicization in Indonesia

Deda Aenul Wardah[1], Kris Nandang[2]*

[1] MTS Al-Hidayah, Sumbakeling
[2] Graduate Student, UIN Siber Syekh Nurjati Cirebon

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	The phenomenon of religious politicization, which entails the exploitation of religion for political gain, poses a serious threat to national unity by fostering divisions among religious communities and undermining democratic principles. This practice stands in stark contrast to the values of religious moderation, which emphasize justice, tolerance, and harmony. Through an exploration of Islamic moderation, this study highlights the concept of uswatun hasanah (a virtuous role model) as a strategic framework to mitigate the negative impacts of religious politicization. Employing a qualitative research approach focused on library research, the study conducts a thematic analysis of Qur'anic verses using descriptive-analytic methods. The findings reveal that religious politicization not only disrupts societal cohesion but also underscores the urgent need for religious moderation as a means to counteract the misuse of religion for political purposes. By advocating the emulation of positive role models, Islam provides a pathway to cultivate virtuous behavior and promote harmony. Furthermore, the concept of uswatun hasanah can be actualized both in society and the digital realm through the creation and dissemination of moderate content while actively filtering out hoaxes, misinformation, and divisive materials. These efforts highlight the pivotal role of uswatun hasanah in fostering interfaith harmony and protecting societal unity from the divisive effects of religious politicization.

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary political climate in Indonesia is increasingly characterized by the politicization of religion, a phenomenon with significant implications for the values of democracy. According to (Kurniawan, 2018), the politicization of religion reached its peak during the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election. In this event, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, also known as Ahok, made a controversial statement during his

engagement with the public in the Thousand Islands, which was perceived by many as an insult to a verse in the holy scripture of Islam. This statement sparked widespread controversy among Muslims, leading to accusations that the non-Muslim gubernatorial candidate had demeaned and insulted Islam (Atriana & Mardiastuti, 2017).

The incident mobilized Muslims from across Indonesia, coordinated by various Islamic organizations, to stage a protest known as the 212 movement. This movement demanded that Ahok receive legal sanctions for his alleged blasphemous remarks (Ihsanuddin, 2021). However, the mass mobilization that highlighted the strong solidarity among Muslims also underscored the prevalence of religious politicization. Initially focused on legal action against Ahok, the issue evolved into a political moment exploited by his opponents to legitimize religious politicization (Kurniawan, 2018)

The National Resilience Institute of Indonesia (Lemhannas RI) has warned that the political year of 2024 may trigger political disputes that could escalate into horizontal conflicts. To prevent such outcomes, proactive measures must be undertaken to mitigate potential conflicts (RI, 2023). According to a survey reported by Kompas, approximately 56% of Indonesians expressed concerns about polarization and division during the 2024 elections and subsequent years. Similarly, Mahfud MD (Indonesian politician) highlighted that in democratic processes, particularly elections, issues such as defamation, hate speech, hoaxes, money politics, and identity politics frequently emerge, exacerbating societal divisions (MANUMOYOSO, 2023).

The Vice Chairperson of the National Human Rights Commission emphasized that religious politicization is becoming a prominent issue in political contests, with significant potential to foster persecution and disintegration (Wiryono, 2022). In line with this, the Executive Director of the Moderate Network of Indonesia predicted that the practice of religious and identity politicization could recur in the 2024 elections and beyond, fostering societal polarization and long-lasting animosity (Hidayat, 2023).

The phenomenon of religious politicization not only undermines democratic values but also contradicts the principles of moderation, as it disregards national commitment and interfaith tolerance (Syahrul Azzahra, 2024). The potential for disintegration resulting from such practices necessitates strategic efforts to foster interreligious harmony. One approach is to promote the values of religious moderation (*wasatiyyah*) through the concept of *uswatun hasanah* (exemplary conduct). Given the susceptibility of society to ideologies propagated through social media, these platforms must be utilized to disseminate models of tolerance-based leadership and behavior (Yuliawati & Asri, 2024). By doing so, social media can

serve as a tool to counteract divisive narratives, mitigate disintegration, and create a harmonious social atmosphere (Musahwi et al., 2023). This paper explores the application of Islamic moderation, grounded in the concept of *uswatun hasanah*, as a proactive strategy to prevent the politicization of religion and strengthen societal unity.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative library research method, enhanced with discourse analysis as a tool to examine the phenomenon of religious politicization. Qualitative research aims to understand phenomena in their natural social context through an in-depth process of interaction and communication between the researcher and the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell, 2013). In this context, discourse analysis is utilized to interpret written texts, including Qur'anic verses and other Islamic sources, within their sociocultural and political frameworks.

Thematic elaboration is applied to analyze the relationship between the concepts of religious moderation (*wasatiyyah*) and religious politicization. By focusing on the language, symbols, and narratives embedded in these texts, discourse analysis provides insights into how religious moderation can be framed as a counter-narrative to religious politicization. This descriptive-analytical approach enables a nuanced understanding of the textual and contextual dimensions of the issue, contributing to broader discussions on societal harmony and democratic values.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A Portrait of the Politicization of Religion in Indonesia

Religion holds a significant position in the lives of Indonesian people, as reflected in the country's foundational ideology, Pancasila, with its first principle reading "Ketuhanan yang Maha Esa" (belief in the one and only God). For centuries, Indonesia has been a fertile ground for the growth of diverse religions and belief systems (Risladiba & Ramdhani, 2021). However, such diversity often gives rise to societal conflicts, particularly when the existence, ideologies, or symbols of religion are exploited to serve political interests. The fusion of religion and politics poses a substantial risk of generating divisions among different groups (Desierto & Koyama, 2022).

Throughout its history, Indonesia has experienced the detrimental effects of religious politicization on interfaith harmony. A mid-2018 report by the Setara Institute revealed that in 20 provinces, there were 109 violations of religious freedom, encompassing 136 actions across the country (Setara Institute, 2018). These violations were primarily triggered by the intensified politicization of religion

during politically charged periods. Additionally, a survey conducted by the Atma Jaya Institute of Public Policy indicated that 45% of the decline in Indonesia's democratic quality could be attributed to religious politicization (Abqa, 2020).

The emergence of religious politicization stems from the strategic use of religious symbols, which are perceived as more compelling and widely accepted due to their emotional resonance with individuals. This emotional appeal often provokes religious communities to defend the honor of their faith or group, potentially leading to interfaith tensions and conflicts (Samosir & Novitasari, 2022).

Religion and politics are deeply intertwined, making the politicization of religion an unavoidable phenomenon in certain contexts. In early 21st-century Indonesia, the use of religious narratives, symbols, and opinion-shaping tactics leveraging religion's image has become commonplace. This trend is further amplified by the proliferation of various community organizations. Over time, these organizations have not only served as platforms for expressing public aspirations but have also facilitated the perpetuation of factionalism and sectarianism (Al-Qurtuby, 2018).

In recent years, the practice of religious politicization has been increasingly normalized across various groups, aiming to garner public support during political contests (Ardipandanto, 2020). A notable example is the 2019 Indonesian presidential election, where religion was frequently exploited as a tool to secure power. During the registration phase, numerous candidates sought alliances with religious leaders or ulama to gain public sympathy (Sihidi et al., 2020). Furthermore, throughout their campaigns, candidates employed religious symbols and attributes such as *kopiah* (traditional caps), *sarung* (traditional skirts), prayer beads, turbans, and even engaged in religious rituals such as collective *dzikir* (remembrance of God) and religious sermons. Such strategies were utilized to create a positive image among the predominantly Muslim population of Indonesia. However, the use of these religious symbols and practices carries the risk of inciting divisions, both within and between religious groups (Ronaldo & Darmaiza, 2021).

Another manifestation of religious politicization lies in the emergence of controversial terminologies such as the "party of God" and the "party of Satan." These terms have been employed by certain factions to brand their chosen political parties (the "party of God") as morally superior to their opposition (the "party of Satan"). This rhetoric serves as a political maneuver to draw public sympathy and align voters with the so-called "party of God." However, this dichotomy exacerbates societal polarization, fragmenting communities along religious lines and increasing the likelihood of horizontal conflicts (Kurniawan, 2018b).

The phenomenon of religious politicization has been further amplified through online media, particularly in the lead-up to elections. This practice has become a

primary driver of hate politics in the name of religion. Emile Durkheim, a prominent sociologist, posits that one of the key elements that strengthens social relationships is the emotional bond rooted in shared religious beliefs. This common foundation inspires religious adherents to collaborate with high levels of enthusiasm, particularly in the realm of political activity (Lawrence-hart, 2023).

Recognizing the significant potential for societal fragmentation resulting from religious politicization, it is imperative to implement measures to mitigate these practices and safeguard unity and peace. One viable solution is the adoption of the concept of religious moderation (Arif, 2020). This approach emphasizes the need for balanced and inclusive religious perspectives, promoting tolerance and mutual respect among different religious groups. By fostering a culture of moderation, Indonesia can preserve its social harmony and uphold the principles of democracy amidst its religious and cultural diversity.

The Concept of Moderation in Islam

In Islam, the concept of moderation is encapsulated in the term *ummatan wasatan*, which translates to "a middle or moderate community." The word *ummat* is derived from the Arabic root *amma-yaummu*, meaning "to lead, to head toward, or to emulate." Meanwhile, the term *wasathan* stems from *wasatha-yasithu-wasathan*, referring to "those in the middle" or "balanced individuals." The term *ummat* is often associated with the notion of being moderate, which signifies maintaining a balanced stance and avoiding any form of extremism (Abqa, 2020). According to (Kamali, 2015), the principle of being in the middle in the context of moderation suggests that in practicing religion, individuals should avoid extreme views or actions. The fundamental essence of moderation lies in maintaining equilibrium between opposing elements. This principle is also reflected in the Qur'an, as stated in Surah Al-Fath (48:29), which highlights the balance and harmony characteristic of a true Muslim community, "*Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah; and those with him are forceful against the disbelievers, merciful among themselves. You see them bowing and prostrating [in prayer], seeking bounty from Allah and [His] pleasure*".

In Tafsir fi Zhilalil Qur'an, Sayyid Quthb (Quthb, 2003) interprets the phrase *asyiddā'u 'alal-kuffāri ruḥamā'u bainahum* as a boundary set by Allah in matters of protecting aqidah (faith), rather than an expression of hatred or subjective animosity. Within the framework of aqidah, Muslims are instructed to be firm with non-believers and not to tolerate deviations concerning faith. However, outside the realm of aqidah, every individual, regardless of their religion or other "attributes," should be treated with kindness and compassion. This interpretation aligns with Tafsir Al-Maraghi, which elaborates that a true believer must exhibit firmness toward anyone who disrespects Islam, but this firmness is confined to matters of

faith. Beyond that, a believer is obliged to spread kindness and foster goodwill among others (Bakar, 1993).

Similarly, in his commentary At-Tahrir wa At-Tanwir, Ibn 'Ashur (n.d.) explains that the verse describes a believer's firm stance against non-believers, rooted in strong faith. This firmness does not equate to hatred but signifies a distinction between matters of aqidah and other aspects of life.. Quraish Shihab (2012), provides a nuanced understanding, emphasizing that the term "*kafir*" in this verse does not solely refer to non-Muslims but also includes individuals who engage in unethical or inhumane actions. He cautions against using this verse as justification for unwarranted harshness toward non-believers and stresses the need for actions grounded in humanistic values.

From these interpretations, it becomes clear that a Muslim must maintain boundaries in their behavior, avoiding extremism in matters of aqidah or politics that could lead to discord among religious communities. This balanced approach is encapsulated in the guidance of Surah Al-Maidah (5:8), which encourages justice and fairness in all dealings, regardless of personal or ideological differences.

> *"O you who have believed, be persistently standing firm for Allah, witnesses in justice, and do not let the hatred of a people prevent you from being just. Be just; that is nearer to righteousness. And fear Allah; indeed, Allah is Acquainted with what you do."*

In Tafsir Al-Azhar, Hamka (1998) emphasizes the importance of justice, as highlighted in the verse, which instructs believers to place everything in its rightful position and proportion. Justice must be upheld regardless of circumstances, and one must not act unjustly due to external influences or biases. In the context of contemporary politics, this verse serves as a reminder for society to approach political matters with moderation and fairness. It calls for establishing clear ethical boundaries in political engagement, discouraging the misuse of religion as a tool to achieve political objectives. This approach is essential to mitigate the divisive potential of religious politicization, which often leads to conflicts among religious communities. Such divisive behaviors must be eliminated, while peace and unity must be actively fostered, as reflected in Surah Al-Hujurat (49:10), which envisions believers as a united brotherhood.

Quraish Shihab (Shihab, 2002) expands on this notion by interpreting the verse to mean that all believers are interconnected as brothers and sisters. He asserts that any disputes among believers must be resolved through peaceful means, emphasizing reconciliation as a priority. Despite differences in ethnicity, language, or physical characteristics, the bond of faith is paramount and should not be weakened by worldly matters, such as practical politics. Shihab's interpretation underscores the principle that unity among believers is non-negotiable and must

transcend transient political disagreements. These interpretations highlight the significance of justice, unity, and moderation in maintaining harmony within the Muslim community. They also provide a valuable framework for navigating the complexities of modern political challenges, ensuring that religion remains a source of peace and guidance rather than a catalyst for division.

The Concept of Uswatun Hasanah as Strengthening Islamic Moderation in the Face of Religious Politicization

Essentially, the politicization of religion is a political practice that contradicts the principles of religious moderation. Such practices often lead to friction or polarization, which must be carefully addressed. The inclusion of religious moderation in Indonesia's National Medium-Term Development Plan (*Rencana Pembangunan Jangka Menengah Nasional*) 2020–2024 underscores the need for all elements of Indonesian society to support efforts to strengthen religious moderation, thereby preserving interfaith harmony. Among the key concepts rooted in the Qur'an that support these efforts is *uswatun hasanah*. Linguistically, *uswatun hasanah* refers to a way of life approved by Allah SWT as exemplified by Prophet Muhammad (Rohaenah et al., 2020). This is highlighted in Surah Al-Ahzab: 21, *"There has certainly been for you in the Messenger of Allah an excellent pattern for anyone whose hope is in Allah and the Last Day and [who] remembers Allah often."*.

According to the Tafsir Ruh Al-Bayan, the term uswatun shares a similar meaning with *Al-Qudwatu* (an example to follow), which describes a state in a person that others may emulate, whether good or bad (Al-Borousawi, n.d.). Quoting Al-Baidhawi, *uswatun hasanah* signifies good actions that can be imitated. Role modeling is a critical component in cultivating values of goodness, making it an effective method for shaping an individual's character. Although the context of this verse pertains to the Prophet Muhammad's leadership during the Battle of Khandaq, the broader lesson emphasizes that Muslims must have role models. Learning through examples is often more effective than theoretical instruction (Najamudin, 2019).

The Tafsir Al-Maraghi highlights that the verse underscores the importance of having a role model in life. Without such a model, humans may struggle to comprehend the truth in their lives (Al-Maraghi, 1993). Similarly, the Tafsir Asy-Sya'rawi emphasizes that a Muslim should adopt a good role model, as emulating virtuous character will reflect positively on the individual's own character (Asy-Sya'rawi, 1999). The Tafsir Jalalain interprets "*laqad kāna lakum fī rasūlillāhi uswatun ḥasanah*" as encompassing everything good from the Prophet Muhammad that is worthy of imitation, such as his steadfastness and patience in preaching. These traits must be contextualized to address contemporary challenges for both

worldly success and eternal happiness (As-Suyuthi & Al-Mahalli, 2012). Furthermore, Ibn Kathir elaborates that if one aspires to lead a fulfilling life, it is essential to have a virtuous role model (Kasīr, n.d.).

From a psychological perspective, the concept of *uswatun hasanah*, or exemplary behavior, is an effective approach to shaping an individual's personality toward goodness. Albert Bandura, a renowned psychologist, asserts that human behavior tends to emulate or adopt the behavior of others in their environment (Bandura, 1974). This means that people are inclined to act based on what they observe and model from others. Consequently, fostering a harmonious and peaceful society requires exemplary figures who inspire the community to act virtuously and uphold interfaith harmony.

According to Nickerson (2023), social cognitive theory views humans as active agents who influence and are influenced by their environment. Individuals learn more effectively by observing and imitating models within their surroundings, enabling them to acquire knowledge and information quickly. The process of role modeling unfolds through the following mechanisms:
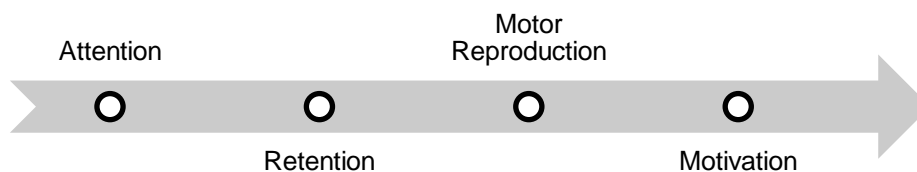

Figure 1. Exemplary Process (Author, 2024)

In contemporary society, many individuals rely on models within their immediate environment for learning. However, a significant portion of knowledge regarding thinking styles, behavior, customs, and social systems is increasingly acquired through extensive modeling in electronic media, particularly social media. Social media's speed and wide reach make it a powerful tool for disseminating perspectives and behaviors. Through modeling on social media, a single influencer can spread their perspectives and behaviors to a large audience quickly and efficiently (Hu et al., 2020). In the context of preventing the politicization of religion, *uswatun hasanah* becomes an effective concept for shaping a community's personality toward courteousness and maintaining peace among religious groups. The implementation of *uswatun hasanah* requires collaboration from all parties, especially individuals with significant influence on social media. Thus, to prevent the politicization of religion that could lead to division, the concept of *uswatun*

hasanah can be actualized both in real life and the digital world by religious figures, community leaders, and influencers.

First, producing positive content as a counter-narrative. The creation of abundant positive content serves as a counterbalance to religious politicization on social media. Social media users, predominantly millennials and Gen-Z, tend to follow trends easily. Many individuals are influenced by influencers and replicate their actions, which indicates that the behavior and mindset of social media users often reflect what influencers promote. As individuals who garner significant attention, content creators or influencers should produce content that educates audiences about healthy democratic practices, ensuring they are not easily provoked by individuals seeking to divide religious harmony. Influencers must also create educational content about healthy political concepts to prevent society from falling victim to deviant political indoctrination. The Working Group on Women and Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism, highlights that influencers have a magnetic appeal capable of attracting a vast audience across multiple platforms. Furthermore, influencers often have a fanbase characterized by high levels of trust and loyalty. A Nielsen survey (WGWC, 2022) revealed that 92% of social media users trust influencers more than traditional advertisements or celebrities. Instead of blocking social media, it would be more effective for influencers to create content or campaigns to combat all forms of religious politicization.

The second strategy involves distributing content promoting religious moderation to a broad audience. Positive content related to democratic practices and religious harmony, created by influencers, should be widely shared to inform, educate, and inspire society. The shared content must not provoke or create tension among religious groups; rather, it should promote peace and serve as an inspiration. Governments should encourage citizens to share positive and harmonious content. This aligns with Islamic teachings, which advocate mutual reminders among individuals. Without the widespread dissemination of positive content, social media could become a platform for irresponsible individuals to propagate negative and divisive material. Filling social media with positive content ensures that more people are inspired to emulate good behavior, transforming social media into a source of exemplary conduct.

The third strategy focuses on filtering and eliminating harmful information from direct interactions and social media platforms. Removing content in this context refers to blocking all provocative material that has the potential to incite conflicts among religious groups while verifying the validity of information from any source. According to Indonesia's Ministry of Communication and Information Technology (Kominfo RI), internet users are highly prone to spreading negative content, such as hoaxes, which intensify during election seasons. Historically, such content has been

inseparable from politics and has been used to influence Muslim voters, who form the majority of the electorate during elections (Kominfo, 2019). Therefore, the government must enact stricter regulations against social media users spreading provocative content, including blocking such material and imposing severe penalties on offenders. Considering the significant influence of social media content on individual perspectives and personalities, eliminating negative content is imperative to prevent society from emulating such behaviors.

In the context of *uswatun hasanah*, the act of filtering negative content and ensuring the dissemination of positive messages reflects the role of a virtuous guide who protects their followers from harm while directing them toward paths of goodness. When governments, influencers, and society collectively implement these actions, they embody the essence of *uswatun hasanah* becoming role models who inspire others to uphold unity and moral integrity, ultimately preventing the fragmentation caused by the politicization of religion. This demonstrates how *uswatun hasanah* can serve not only as a moral ideal but also as a practical strategy for addressing modern societal challenges, particularly in the digital age.

CONCLUSION

The politicization of religion is a phenomenon that must be eradicated as it poses a significant threat to interfaith harmony and has the potential to create divisions among religious communities. The Qur'an offers an effective concept to counter this issue, through religious moderation. Religious moderation serves as a core value that guides individuals to uphold justice and tolerance in their social interactions. To achieve these values, the Qur'an presents the concept of *uswatun hasanah* (a virtuous role model) as a key to fostering justice and tolerance.

The principles of Islamic moderation can act as a safeguard for society, protecting it from divisions caused by the exploitation of religion for political interests. The concept of *uswatun hasanah* provides a foundation for communities, religious leaders, governments, and influencers, particularly those active in the digital space, to embody and promote Islamic moderation. Practical steps include creating and disseminating informative and moderate content, ensuring its wide circulation, and filtering or removing misinformation, hostility, and divisive content. By adopting these measures, *uswatun hasanah* can be actualized as a powerful tool to build a harmonious and united society, free from the negative impacts of religious politicization.

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