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Identity Politics and Local Political Representation Based on the Adat Basandi Syara' Philosophy in Indonesian Democracy among Minangkabau and Malay Communities

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Abstract
Identity politics remains a defining feature of local democratic practices in Indonesia, particularly in regions where cultural and religious norms strongly shape political behavior. This study examines how the Adat Basandi Syara' philosophy functions as a normative foundation for political representation among Minangkabau and Malay communities. It aims to critically analyze the ways in which shared adat–Islamic values influence patterns of local political representation and democratic legitimacy. Using a qualitative comparative approach, this study draws on secondary data from scholarly publications, official documents, and media reports related to local politics in West Sumatra and Malay regions. The findings indicate that Adat Basandi Syara' is frequently mobilized as a symbolic resource to legitimize political authority; however, its interpretation is often selectively shaped by political elites. Rather than fostering substantive representation, such identity-based narratives tend to reinforce symbolic inclusion and elite domination. This study contributes to debates on Indonesian democracy by demonstrating that culturally rooted identity politics may simultaneously promote social cohesion and reproduce political exclusion within plural democratic settings.

Keywords: Identity politics; Local political representation; Adat basandi syara'; Minangkabau and malay communities; Indonesian democracy.

INTRODUCTION

Background

Identity politics has become an increasingly visible feature of local democratic practices in Indonesia, particularly in regions where cultural and religious norms continue to shape political behavior and legitimacy. The post reform decentralization era has expanded political space for local actors to articulate ethnic, religious, and cultural identities within electoral competition and governance. While this development is often framed as a democratic gain, it simultaneously raises critical questions regarding the substance of political representation and the extent to which

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identity based politics contributes to inclusive democratic outcomes.

Within Minangkabau society, the philosophy of *Adat Basandi Syara', Syara' Basandi Kitabullah* functions as a central normative framework that regulates social order, moral authority, and political conduct. This philosophy positions adat and Islam as mutually reinforcing foundations of collective life rather than as competing sources of authority. In local political practice, *Adat Basandi Syara'* is not merely a cultural principle but a symbolic and normative resource frequently invoked to legitimize leadership, political authority, and claims of representation. Previous studies have shown that adat leaders, religious figures, and political elites play a strategic role in translating these values into the language of local democracy, particularly in West Sumatra and Malay regions.

However, the political use of adat and religious values does not automatically result in substantive representation. Research on local governance in West Sumatra demonstrates that Minangkabau identity is often selectively mobilized by political elites as a source of moral legitimacy, while its implementation in public policy remains limited and inconsistent. Hasan argues that the institutionalization of Minangkabau identity within local bureaucracy frequently operates at a symbolic level, reinforcing elite authority rather than strengthening participatory representation or accountability.

A similar pattern can be observed in Malay Muslim communities, especially in Riau and other Malay regions. Studies on Malay identity politics indicate that the emphasis on Melayu Islam identity has been used by political actors to construct an image of cultural authenticity and moral governance. Yet, this emphasis often marginalizes alternative voices within the community, including women, minority groups, and non dominant social actors. Firdaus highlights that identity based narratives in Malay politics tend to privilege cultural symbolism over concrete political inclusion, resulting in a form of representation that is culturally resonant but socially uneven.

From the perspective of political representation theory, the central issue lies not only in descriptive representation, namely who occupies political office, but also in substantive representation, which concerns whose interests are genuinely articulated and defended. Burhanuddin notes that ethnic and cultural identity in local politics often functions as a symbolic marker rather than as a mechanism for advancing collective interests. As a result, identity based representation may produce recognition without redistribution, visibility without meaningful political influence.

Gender representation further complicates the relationship between adat, religion, and local democracy. In Minangkabau society, the symbolic position of *Bundo Kanduang* reflects the matrilineal tradition, yet empirical studies show that women's political representation within local governance structures remains constrained. Juliana demonstrates that although traditional institutions acknowledge women's cultural authority, political decision making continues to be dominated by male interpretations of adat and religious norms. This condition suggests that *Adat Basandi Syara'* is not a fixed doctrine but a

contested framework shaped by power relations and elite interests.

Despite the growing body of literature on identity politics in Indonesia, many studies examine ethnicity and religion as separate analytical categories or emphasize their role in political polarization and conflict. Comparative analyses that focus on the normative function of *Adat Basandi Syara'* in shaping local political representation across Minangkabau and Malay communities remain limited. This gap is significant given the shared historical experience of adat Islam interaction and colonial political restructuring that continues to influence contemporary local democracy. Mulyadi's historical analysis illustrates how colonial governance contributed to the formalization of ethnic identities, creating long term implications for political representation in both Minangkabau and Malay societies.

This study addresses this gap by critically examining how *Adat Basandi Syara'* operates as a normative foundation for local political representation in Minangkabau and Malay communities within Indonesia's democratic framework. Rather than treating identity politics as inherently democratic or inherently problematic, this study positions it as an ambivalent political practice shaped by elite strategies, institutional constraints, and socio cultural power relations.

The objectives of this study are threefold. First, it seeks to explain the role of *Adat Basandi Syara'* as a normative reference in the construction of local political representation. Second, it aims to identify patterns through which political elites mobilize adat and Islamic values in local democratic processes. Third, it analyzes the implications of identity based representation for democratic legitimacy and the quality of political representation at the local level. By doing so, this study contributes to broader debates on identity politics, local democracy, and political representation in Indonesia by offering a grounded and critical reading of culturally embedded political practices.

Theoretical Framework

Identity politics in contemporary political analysis is understood not merely as the expression of cultural or religious attachment, but as a strategic process through which identity is constructed, mobilized, and negotiated within power relations. In local democratic contexts, identity often functions as a political resource that enables actors to claim legitimacy, moral authority, and cultural authenticity. Studies on Indonesian local politics demonstrate that ethnic and religious identities are frequently articulated not as exclusionary tools alone, but as symbolic frameworks that structure political competition and voter alignment (Haboddin, 2023). This perspective situates identity politics as a dynamic and contextual phenomenon rather than a static or primordial condition.

Within this framework, identity operates at the intersection of culture, power, and representation. Political actors do not simply represent social groups because they share the same ethnic or religious background. Instead, representation is mediated through narratives that link personal identity to collective values and moral norms. Research on Malay and Minangkabau

political contexts shows that identity narratives are often framed as instruments of social harmony and moral order, while simultaneously reinforcing established hierarchies and elite dominance (Handayani, 2020). This dual character of identity politics highlights its ambivalent role in democratic processes.

Political representation theory provides a critical lens to assess how identity is translated into political practice. Representation extends beyond descriptive presence in political institutions and includes the capacity to articulate interests, influence policy outcomes, and maintain accountability. The distinction between symbolic representation and substantive representation is particularly relevant in culturally embedded societies. Symbolic representation emphasizes shared identity and cultural proximity, whereas substantive representation focuses on policy responsiveness and social justice (Burhanuddin, 2022). In many local political settings, symbolic representation rooted in identity narratives tends to prevail, often at the expense of substantive democratic performance.

In Minangkabau and Malay societies, the relationship between identity and representation is deeply shaped by customary philosophy. The principle of *Adat Basandi Syara', Syara' Basandi Kitabullah* constitutes a normative framework that integrates adat and Islamic values as a unified moral order. This philosophy functions not only as a cultural guideline but also as a reference point for political legitimacy and leadership ethics. Empirical studies indicate that *Adat Basandi Syara'* is frequently invoked in political discourse to frame authority as morally grounded and culturally appropriate (Hasan, 2022). Through this invocation, political representation is presented as an extension of collective moral responsibility rather than institutional authority alone.

From a theoretical standpoint, *Adat Basandi Syara'* can be understood as a mediating structure between identity politics and political representation. On one hand, it provides ethical standards that may strengthen democratic legitimacy by rooting leadership in shared values. On the other hand, its interpretative flexibility allows political elites to selectively appropriate adat and religious symbols to consolidate power. This selective interpretation often marginalizes alternative interpretations within the same cultural community, particularly those that challenge dominant political interests (Ibrahim et al., 2023). Consequently, the use of *Adat Basandi Syara'* in political representation reflects ongoing contestation rather than cultural consensus.

Critical approaches to identity politics emphasize that culturally grounded political frameworks do not automatically produce inclusive democracy. While identity-based representation may enhance social cohesion and symbolic inclusion, it can also reproduce exclusionary practices and limit substantive participation. In this sense, identity politics grounded in adat and religion should be analyzed not only as a source of legitimacy but also as a site of power negotiation within local democratic structures (Hermansyah, 2023).

Problem Statement

The growing body of literature on identity politics in Indonesian local democracy has provided valuable insights into the interaction between ethnicity, religion, and political competition. Existing studies have examined how identity is mobilized in electoral processes, governance practices, and symbolic leadership across diverse local contexts. Research on Malay and Minangkabau societies, in particular, has highlighted the role of cultural and religious identity in shaping political legitimacy and public discourse. However, much of this literature remains descriptive, emphasizing the visibility of identity narratives rather than critically examining how such narratives operate within mechanisms of political representation.

A central problem lies in the tendency of previous studies to treat identity-based representation as inherently reflective of communal interests. While shared cultural or religious identity is often assumed to strengthen democratic representation, limited attention has been given to the distinction between symbolic inclusion and substantive political representation. As a result, identity politics is frequently interpreted as a unifying democratic force without sufficient scrutiny of how power, elite interests, and selective interpretation of cultural values shape representational outcomes. This gap is particularly evident in studies that discuss local identity politics without interrogating whose interests are ultimately represented and whose voices remain marginal.

In the context of Minangkabau and Malay societies, the philosophy of *Adat Basandi Syara', Syara' Basandi Kitabullah* occupies a central normative position in social and political life. Although several studies acknowledge its importance as a moral and cultural foundation, there is limited critical analysis of how this philosophy is operationalized in contemporary political representation. Existing research often presents Adat Basandi Syara' as a cohesive and consensual value system, overlooking its interpretative flexibility and its potential use as a political instrument by local elites. Consequently, the relationship between adat-based identity narratives and democratic legitimacy remains underexplored.

Another unresolved issue concerns the comparative dimension of identity politics between Minangkabau and Malay communities. While both societies share strong adat–Islamic traditions, their historical trajectories, institutional arrangements, and political practices differ. Current literature rarely places these two contexts in direct analytical dialogue, resulting in fragmented understandings of how similar normative frameworks may produce different representational dynamics. The absence of a comparative perspective limits the ability to draw broader conclusions about the role of culturally grounded identity politics in Indonesia's local democracy.

Based on these gaps, the core problem addressed in this study is the lack of critical analysis regarding how *Adat Basandi Syara'* functions as a normative foundation for political representation rather than merely as a cultural symbol. Specifically, this study questions whether identity-based representation grounded in adat and

religion enhances substantive democratic representation or primarily reinforces symbolic legitimacy and elite domination. Addressing this problem is essential to understanding the ambivalent role of identity politics in plural democratic settings and to reassessing its implications for democratic representation in Indonesia.

METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative research design with a comparative analytical approach to examine identity-based political representation grounded in the philosophy of *Adat Basandi Syara', Syara' Basandi Kitabullah*. The qualitative approach is considered appropriate because the research focuses on interpreting meanings, narratives, and normative values that shape political legitimacy rather than measuring electoral behavior or institutional performance quantitatively. By employing a comparative perspective, the study seeks to identify both shared patterns and contextual differences in the political use of adat and religious identity among Minangkabau and Malay communities.

The research is based on secondary data drawn from peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, official documents, and selected media publications related to local politics in Indonesia. Academic sources were selected using purposive criteria, including thematic relevance to identity politics and political representation, focus on Minangkabau or Malay socio-political contexts, and publication within the last fifteen years. Media and institutional documents were used to complement academic sources by providing contextual insights into contemporary political discourse and public narratives surrounding adat and local democracy.

Data collection was conducted through systematic literature review and qualitative document analysis. The collected materials were organized into analytical categories, namely identity construction, symbolic and substantive representation, political legitimacy, and elite appropriation of adat and religious values. This categorization allowed for structured comparison across different cases and facilitated the identification of recurring patterns as well as contextual variations between Minangkabau and Malay political settings.

The data analysis employed an interpretative and comparative qualitative technique. Texts were critically examined to understand how *Adat Basandi Syara'* is articulated as a normative reference in political discourse and how its meanings are negotiated in practices of representation. The comparative analysis focused on differences in the modes of legitimization, representational claims, and the extent to which identity narratives translated into substantive political outcomes. This approach enables the study to move beyond descriptive accounts and toward a critical assessment of identity-based political representation.

To ensure analytical rigor and validity, the study applied source triangulation by cross-checking interpretations across multiple scholarly works and empirical contexts. The analysis also involved theoretical cross-referencing to maintain consistency between empirical observations and

conceptual frameworks on identity politics and political representation. Through this process, the research aims to produce a balanced and credible interpretation of the ambivalent role of culturally grounded identity politics in Indonesia's local democracy.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Identity Politics as a Source of Political Legitimacy

Identity politics in Indonesia's local democratic practices frequently operates as a central mechanism for constructing political legitimacy. Rather than relying solely on formal electoral procedures, political authority in culturally rooted societies is often evaluated through conformity to shared moral values, religious norms, and customary principles. In Minangkabau and Malay communities, political legitimacy is deeply intertwined with adat and Islamic identity, which function as culturally recognized standards of ethical leadership (Haboddin, 2023).

The philosophy of *Adat Basandi Syara', Syara' Basandi Kitabullah* provides a normative foundation through which political authority is framed and justified. Political actors commonly invoke this philosophy to present leadership as a moral obligation rather than a contractual mandate derived from electoral competition. This framing situates political power within a culturally sanctioned moral order, allowing leaders to claim legitimacy based on their perceived alignment with adat and religious values (Hasan, 2022). As a result, legitimacy is often assessed through symbolic markers of cultural authenticity rather than through demonstrable policy performance.

However, identity-based legitimacy carries inherent tensions within democratic systems. While cultural and religious narratives may strengthen social acceptance and political stability, they also risk displacing democratic accountability. Empirical studies on Malay Islamic identity politics indicate that moral symbolism is frequently used to sustain political authority even in the absence of substantive policy achievements (Firdaus, 2021). In such cases, identity functions as a discursive shield that protects political elites from critical evaluation based on governance outcomes.

In Minangkabau society, *Adat Basandi Syara'* historically emphasizes deliberation, balance, and ethical leadership rooted in communal consensus. Yet contemporary political practice demonstrates a selective interpretation of these values. Political elites tend to emphasize hierarchical obedience and moral conformity while marginalizing participatory elements that could challenge elite authority. Ibrahim et al. (2023) argue that this selective appropriation transforms adat from a shared ethical framework into a strategic political instrument used to consolidate power.

A similar dynamic is evident in Malay political contexts, where political legitimacy is constructed through the fusion of ethnic pride and Islamic morality. While this fusion reinforces cultural cohesion, it also narrows the criteria of legitimate leadership by privileging dominant identity narratives. Jurif and Albintani (2023) note that such

identity-based legitimacy may limit plural political expression and marginalize alternative voices within local democratic arenas.

In the Minangkabau context, political legitimacy is predominantly articulated through conformity to the moral order embedded in *Adat Basandi Syara', Syara' Basandi Kitabullah*. Leadership is commonly evaluated based on perceived adherence to adat principles and Islamic ethics, which are understood as inseparable sources of moral authority. Political actors who are able to demonstrate alignment with these values are often regarded as legitimate representatives of the community, regardless of the extent to which their leadership translates into concrete policy performance. In this setting, adat operates as a collective moral reference that frames political authority as an ethical obligation rather than merely an institutional mandate (Hasan, 2022).

Despite its normative emphasis on deliberation and collective ethics, the practical application of *Adat Basandi Syara'* in contemporary Minangkabau politics reveals a selective pattern. Political elites tend to highlight hierarchical and moralistic aspects of adat that reinforce obedience and social order, while participatory elements that could encourage accountability and public deliberation receive less emphasis. This selective interpretation allows adat to function as a legitimizing discourse that stabilizes elite authority and limits challenges to established power structures (Ibrahim et al., 2023).

In Malay political contexts, legitimacy is constructed through a different yet comparable mechanism. Rather than being grounded primarily in a codified philosophical framework, political authority is legitimized through the fusion of ethnic identity and Islamic morality. Leaders are expected to embody cultural authenticity and visibly perform religious commitment, which together serve as markers of moral credibility in the public sphere. This mode of legitimation reinforces a shared sense of identity and social cohesion, but it also shifts political evaluation toward symbolic performance rather than substantive governance outcomes (Firdaus, 2021).

Across both contexts, identity-based legitimacy relies heavily on symbolic alignment with culturally dominant values. In Minangkabau society, this alignment is framed through adherence to adat–Islamic norms, while in Malay society it is articulated through the performance of ethnic and religious authenticity. Although these forms of legitimacy differ in expression, they converge in redefining political authority in symbolic and moral terms. As a consequence, democratic accountability is often subordinated to cultural conformity, and political representation becomes increasingly detached from policy responsiveness and institutional performance (Haboddin, 2023).

This convergence suggests that identity politics functions as a powerful yet ambivalent source of political legitimacy in local democratic settings. While it strengthens cultural resonance and facilitates social acceptance of leadership, it simultaneously narrows the criteria through which political authority is evaluated. By prioritizing moral

symbolism over substantive representation, identity-based legitimacy risks constraining plural democratic engagement and limiting critical public scrutiny of political power (Jurif & Albintani, 2023).

Symbolic Representation versus Substantive Representation

In discussions of identity politics within local democratic settings, political representation is often conflated with the presence of shared cultural or religious identity between representatives and constituents. This assumption underlies much of the discourse surrounding identity-based politics in Indonesia, where descriptive similarity is frequently treated as evidence of representational effectiveness. However, political representation extends beyond symbolic presence and requires substantive engagement with public interests, policy responsiveness, and accountability mechanisms. The distinction between symbolic and substantive representation is therefore essential for understanding the actual democratic implications of identity politics (Burhanuddin, 2022).

Symbolic representation operates through shared identity markers such as ethnicity, religion, language, and cultural symbolism. In Minangkabau and Malay political contexts, symbolic representation is often constructed through visible adherence to adat and Islamic norms, which signals moral proximity to the community. Such symbolic alignment creates a sense of collective belonging and trust, enabling political actors to claim representational legitimacy without necessarily demonstrating policy effectiveness. Studies on local identity politics indicate that symbolic representation is particularly effective in culturally cohesive societies, where moral conformity is valued as an indicator of leadership quality (Handayani, 2020).

However, the dominance of symbolic representation poses challenges for democratic accountability. When political legitimacy is grounded primarily in cultural symbolism, public evaluation of leadership tends to focus on moral performance rather than governance outcomes. In the Minangkabau context, representatives who successfully align themselves with adat–Islamic values may be perceived as legitimate even when participatory decision-making and policy responsiveness remain limited. This condition reflects a broader pattern in which symbolic conformity substitutes for substantive political engagement (Hasan, 2022).

Substantive representation, by contrast, emphasizes the ability of political representatives to articulate interests, translate social demands into policy, and respond to the needs of diverse constituencies. In identity-based political environments, substantive representation is often overshadowed by symbolic claims of cultural authenticity. Research on local political practices demonstrates that representatives who rely heavily on identity narratives tend to prioritize symbolic gestures and moral rhetoric, while concrete policy issues receive less sustained attention (Firdaus, 2021). As a result, identity-based representation risks becoming performative rather than transformative.

The tension between symbolic and substantive representation is further

intensified by elite control over identity narratives. Political elites often act as gatekeepers of cultural interpretation, determining which expressions of adat or religious values are considered legitimate. This dynamic limits alternative forms of representation and marginalizes voices that challenge dominant identity frameworks. In both Minangkabau and Malay contexts, such elite mediation reinforces symbolic representation while constraining substantive democratic participation (Ibrahim et al., 2023).

Overall, the analysis suggests that identity politics tends to privilege symbolic representation over substantive representation in local democratic settings. While symbolic representation contributes to social cohesion and political stability, it also weakens democratic accountability by redefining representation in cultural and moral terms. Without mechanisms that link identity-based legitimacy to policy performance and participatory governance, identity politics risks reinforcing elite dominance rather than enhancing democratic representation (Hermansyah, 2023).

Elite Appropriation of Cultural and Religious Identity

The persistence of identity politics in local democratic practices cannot be separated from the active role of political elites in interpreting, framing, and mobilizing cultural and religious symbols. Identity does not operate as a neutral or static social category; rather, it is continuously reconstructed through elite discourse and political practice. In both Minangkabau and Malay contexts, elites function as key actors who determine which interpretations of adat and religious values are considered legitimate and politically acceptable. This process transforms identity from a shared cultural heritage into a strategic political resource (Haboddin, 2023).

In Minangkabau society, *Adat Basandi Syara', Syara' Basandi Kitabullah* is often invoked as a comprehensive moral framework that integrates custom, religion, and leadership ethics. However, contemporary political practices reveal that this philosophy is frequently appropriated in a selective manner. Political elites tend to emphasize elements of adat that support hierarchy, moral authority, and social obedience, while sidelining principles related to deliberation, collective consensus, and egalitarian participation. This selective appropriation allows elites to claim cultural legitimacy while minimizing demands for democratic accountability (Ibrahim et al., 2023).

Such elite-driven interpretations gradually reshape public understanding of adat itself. Rather than functioning as a living ethical system negotiated through communal practices, adat becomes reified as a symbolic marker of authority controlled by political actors. In this context, dissent or alternative interpretations of adat may be framed as culturally inappropriate or even morally deviant. This dynamic restricts the space for democratic contestation and reinforces elite dominance under the guise of cultural preservation (Hasan, 2022).

A similar pattern can be observed in Malay political contexts, where ethnic identity and Islamic morality are

frequently intertwined in elite discourse. Political leaders often present themselves as guardians of cultural authenticity and religious values, positioning their authority as a moral necessity for social stability. Through public rituals, religious symbolism, and moral rhetoric, elites cultivate an image of cultural guardianship that discourages critical engagement with their policy decisions. As a result, political legitimacy is sustained through symbolic performance rather than through substantive responsiveness to public needs (Firdaus, 2021).

The appropriation of identity by elites also affects the inclusivity of political representation. When cultural and religious identity is defined narrowly by dominant elites, groups that do not fully conform to these definitions risk marginalization. In both Minangkabau and Malay societies, women, youth, and minority interpretations within the same cultural group may find limited space for political expression. Elite-controlled identity narratives thus function as mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, shaping who is recognized as a legitimate political subject (Handayani, 2020).

Moreover, elite appropriation of identity often produces a depoliticizing effect. By framing political authority as an extension of moral or cultural obligation, elites reduce political contestation to questions of loyalty and authenticity. Policy debates, institutional performance, and governance outcomes become secondary to symbolic displays of identity. This condition weakens democratic deliberation and shifts political competition away from programmatic platforms toward moral and cultural signaling (Burhanuddin, 2022).

Despite these constraints, identity-based legitimacy remains resilient because it resonates with deeply rooted social values. Many community members continue to perceive elite invocations of adat and religious morality as natural and necessary components of leadership. This acceptance reflects the enduring power of cultural norms in shaping political expectations. However, without critical engagement, such acceptance risks normalizing elite dominance and limiting the transformative potential of local democracy (Jurif & Albintani, 2023).

Overall, the analysis demonstrates that identity politics is not merely a bottom-up expression of cultural belonging but is actively structured through elite appropriation. In Minangkabau and Malay contexts, elites strategically mobilize adat and religious identity to consolidate authority, manage political competition, and redefine democratic legitimacy in symbolic terms. Recognizing this elite-driven dynamic is essential for understanding how identity politics simultaneously sustains cultural continuity and constrains democratic accountability in local governance.

Implications of Identity Politics for Local Democratic Accountability

The consolidation of identity politics in local democratic arenas has significant implications for the quality of democratic accountability. When political legitimacy is constructed primarily through cultural and religious identity, the criteria used by citizens to evaluate political leadership tend to shift away from institutional performance and policy effectiveness. In

such contexts, accountability is increasingly moralized, with leaders being judged based on perceived adherence to cultural norms rather than their capacity to deliver public goods or uphold democratic procedures (Haboddin, 2023).

In Minangkabau political settings, the invocation of *Adat Basandi Syara', Syara' Basandi Kitabullah* contributes to a moral framework that shapes public expectations of leadership. While this framework emphasizes ethical conduct and communal responsibility, its politicized application often limits critical scrutiny of political authority. Leaders who successfully present themselves as morally aligned with adat and Islamic values may be shielded from sustained evaluation of their governance performance. Consequently, democratic accountability becomes conditional upon cultural conformity rather than administrative transparency or policy outcomes (Hasan, 2022).

A comparable dynamic is evident in Malay political contexts, where Islamic morality and ethnic identity are central to public perceptions of political legitimacy. Accountability mechanisms are frequently mediated through religious symbolism and moral rhetoric, which shape how citizens interpret political actions. This mediation reduces the salience of formal accountability instruments, such as legislative oversight or public deliberation, and reinforces a personalized form of authority grounded in moral credibility (Firdaus, 2021).

The dominance of identity-based accountability also affects the behavior of political representatives. Faced with electorates that prioritize moral symbolism, representatives may allocate greater resources to maintaining symbolic legitimacy through cultural performances, religious visibility, and identity-based narratives. This focus often comes at the expense of programmatic policymaking and institutional reform. Research on local governance suggests that such symbolic prioritization contributes to stagnant policy innovation and weak responsiveness to socio-economic challenges (Burhanuddin, 2022).

Furthermore, identity-based accountability tends to produce uneven democratic participation. Citizens who align with dominant identity narratives may feel politically represented and morally validated, while those whose identities or interpretations differ may experience political alienation. In both Minangkabau and Malay societies, this dynamic can marginalize minority voices within the same cultural group and restrict pluralistic political engagement. Democratic accountability, under these conditions, becomes selective rather than inclusive (Handayani, 2020).

Despite these limitations, identity politics cannot be dismissed as inherently detrimental to democracy. Cultural and religious values remain important sources of social cohesion and political motivation. The challenge lies in balancing identity-based legitimacy with institutional accountability. Without mechanisms that reconnect moral legitimacy to policy performance and participatory governance, identity politics risks entrenching elite dominance and weakening democratic oversight at the local level (Jurif & Albintani, 2023).

Overall, the implications of identity politics for local democratic accountability are deeply ambivalent. While identity-based legitimacy enhances cultural resonance and political stability, it simultaneously redefines accountability in symbolic terms. This redefinition limits the capacity of democratic institutions to function as arenas of critical evaluation and collective decision-making, underscoring the need for institutional frameworks that integrate cultural legitimacy with substantive democratic accountability.

CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that identity politics remains a central feature of local democratic practices in Indonesia, particularly in socio-cultural contexts where adat and religion function as dominant normative frameworks. Through a comparative analysis of Minangkabau and Malay communities, this article shows that identity-based political representation is not merely a cultural expression but a strategic mechanism through which political legitimacy is constructed, negotiated, and maintained.

In the Minangkabau context, the philosophy of *Adat Basandi Syara', Syara' Basandi Kitabullah* operates as a powerful moral reference that shapes public expectations of political leadership. While this philosophy historically emphasizes collective deliberation, ethical governance, and social responsibility, its contemporary political use often reflects selective interpretation. Political elites tend to mobilize adat as a symbolic resource to legitimize authority, while participatory and egalitarian dimensions of adat receive less emphasis. As a result, political representation becomes symbolically inclusive but substantively limited.

Similarly, in Malay political settings, the fusion of ethnic identity and Islamic morality serves as a primary source of political legitimacy. Leaders are evaluated based on their ability to perform cultural authenticity and religious commitment, which reinforces social cohesion but simultaneously narrows the criteria for democratic accountability. Political authority is thus legitimized through moral symbolism rather than policy effectiveness or institutional responsiveness.

Across both cases, this study finds a consistent pattern in which identity politics strengthens symbolic representation while constraining substantive representation. Identity-based legitimacy tends to prioritize moral alignment and cultural conformity over programmatic performance, resulting in a form of democracy that is socially resonant but institutionally fragile. Democratic accountability is redefined in moral terms, reducing the space for critical public scrutiny and weakening mechanisms of representative evaluation.

Importantly, this study does not argue that identity politics is inherently incompatible with democracy. On the contrary, cultural and religious values continue to play a vital role in fostering political participation and social cohesion at the local level. However, when identity narratives are monopolized by political elites and detached from institutional accountability, they risk reproducing exclusionary power relations and limiting democratic pluralism.

The contribution of this study lies in its critical examination of how culturally rooted identity politics functions simultaneously as a source of legitimacy and a constraint on democratic representation. By situating Adat Basandi Syara' within broader debates on identity politics and local democracy, this article highlights the need to rearticulate cultural legitimacy in ways that reinforce, rather than undermine, substantive political representation and democratic accountability in Indonesia's plural political landscape.

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