

Political Primordialism in Indonesia's Democratic System: An Islamic Constitutional Law Analysis of Identity-Based Preferences in the Election of Political Leaders

Anjas Saputra

Alauddin State Islamic University, Makassar, Indonesia
10200123052@uin-alauddin.ac.id

Muh Imam Sejati

Alauddin State Islamic University, Makassar, Indonesia
10200123050@uin-alauddin.ac.id

Mustafa

Alauddin State Islamic University, Makassar, Indonesia
10200123071@uin-alauddin.ac.id

Kurniati

Alauddin State Islamic University, Makassar, Indonesia
kurniati@uin-alauddin.ac.id

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Abstract

This study examines the phenomenon of political primordialism in Indonesian democracy through the perspective of Islamic constitutional law as a normative framework, focusing on how identity based preferences such as religion, ethnicity, and group affiliation influence voters' choices in leadership elections and how these practices are evaluated within Islamic leadership principles. Departing from the tension between the ideal of rational democracy and the empirical reality of rising identity politics, this research employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive analytical method integrating empirical data and normative analysis of the principles of trustworthiness, justice, and competence. The findings show that political primordialism functions not only as a strategy for electoral mobilization by political actors but is also interpreted by voters as a form of collective identity representation, however from the perspective of Islamic constitutional law such practices tend to deviate as they prioritize identity over leadership quality which consequently weakens political rationality and undermines the principles of justice and public welfare in governance.

Keywords: Political Primordialism, Identity Politics, Democracy, Islamic Constitutional Law, Islamic Leadership.

Abstract

Penelitian ini mengkaji fenomena primordialisme politik dalam demokrasi Indonesia dengan pendekatan hukum tata negara Islam sebagai kerangka normatif, dengan fokus pada bagaimana preferensi identitas berbasis agama, etnis, dan afiliasi kelompok memengaruhi pilihan pemilih dalam pemilihan pemimpin serta bagaimana praktik tersebut dinilai dalam prinsip kepemimpinan Islam. Berangkat dari ketegangan antara idealitas demokrasi yang rasional dan realitas empiris yang menunjukkan menguatnya politik identitas, penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif

dengan metode deskriptif analitis yang mengintegrasikan data empiris dan telaah normatif terhadap prinsip amanah, keadilan, dan kapasitas. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa primordialisme politik tidak hanya berfungsi sebagai strategi mobilisasi elektoral oleh aktor politik tetapi juga dimaknai oleh pemilih sebagai representasi identitas kolektif, namun dalam perspektif hukum tata negara Islam praktik tersebut cenderung menyimpang karena mengedepankan identitas dibanding kualitas kepemimpinan sehingga berimplikasi pada melemahnya rasionalitas politik serta prinsip keadilan dan kemaslahatan dalam pemerintahan.

Kata Kunci: Primordialisme Politik, Politik Identitas, Demokrasi, Hukum Tata Negara Islam, Kepemimpinan Islam.

INTRODUCTION

Democracy, in its normative conception, positions citizens as rational political actors capable of making informed electoral choices. Such decisions should be based on objective considerations, including candidates' policy agendas, competence, and integrity. Accordingly, elections should not merely function as procedural mechanisms for transferring political power but also serve as deliberative processes that substantively embody the principle of popular sovereignty (Cai, 2024). From the perspective of constitutional law, including the tradition of Islamic constitutional thought, legitimate leadership is founded upon the principles of *al-amānah* (trustworthiness or integrity), *al-kifāyah* (competence), and *al-'adālah* (justice). Consequently, leadership selection should not be determined by primordial considerations such as ethnicity, religion, or narrow identity affiliations. A mature democratic system therefore requires that identity-based preferences do not become the primary basis for selecting political leaders (Zamzamy, 2025).

Despite these normative ideals, democratic practice in Indonesia reveals a markedly different reality. Since the Reformasi era, electoral competition has increasingly been characterized by the growing prominence of identity politics and primordial sentiments as instruments of political mobilization. Contemporary scholarship consistently demonstrates that identity politics has become an enduring feature of Indonesia's post-Reformasi democracy and continues to recur throughout successive electoral cycles. During the 2024 General Election, for example, political actors continued to exploit religious, ethnic, and group-based identities to shape voter preferences. In several instances, these practices contributed to deepening social polarization and intensifying divisions within society (Sejati, 2023).

The expansion of the digital public sphere has further reinforced this phenomenon. Social media has evolved beyond its function as a platform for political communication and has become a powerful medium for reproducing and disseminating primordial narratives. Existing studies indicate that the strategic use of identity politics across digital platforms contributes to increasing social fragmentation, group fanaticism, and discriminatory behavior during electoral processes. Recent evidence likewise demonstrates a significant increase in identity-based hate speech and political polarization within Indonesia's online political discourse, particularly during the period preceding presidential elections. These developments suggest that political preferences are not always shaped through rational evaluations of candidates' qualifications or policy proposals but are also strongly influenced by emotional attachments and exclusive identity affiliations (Latifa, 2023).

Moreover, identity politics should not be viewed merely as a spontaneous social phenomenon. In many instances, it constitutes a deliberate political strategy consciously employed

by political elites to consolidate electoral support. Religious symbols, faith-based narratives, and dichotomous representations distinguishing perceived in-groups from out-groups are frequently utilized as instruments of political mobilization. In some cases, political actors explicitly portray themselves as representatives of particular identity groups to strengthen their electoral legitimacy. Consequently, political legitimacy becomes increasingly rooted in primordial affiliations rather than democratic values. As a result, electoral competition, which ideally should center on policy alternatives and competing political ideas, is transformed into an arena dominated by identity-based mobilization, thereby undermining the substantive quality of democratic governance (Lubis, 2024).

This condition raises both normative and empirical concerns. Normatively, the predominance of primordial politics contradicts the principles of constitutional democracy, which emphasize equality before the law, equal political participation, and the exercise of public reason in democratic decision-making. Likewise, from the perspective of Islamic constitutional law, such practices obscure the normative standards of leadership, which prioritize competence, trustworthiness, and justice over particularistic identity considerations. Empirically, identity politics also carries significant risks of social fragmentation, horizontal conflict, and even threats to national integration if left unmanaged (Wingarta, 2021).

Against this backdrop, a deeper understanding is required regarding how political primordialism shapes voter preferences within Indonesia's democratic system. Equally important is a critical examination of this phenomenon through the normative framework of Islamic constitutional law. Existing scholarship reveals a notable gap in this regard. Most previous studies have approached identity politics primarily as either a sociological phenomenon or a pragmatic electoral strategy, without systematically integrating the normative principles of Islamic constitutional law into their analyses. Yet, this perspective offers considerable analytical value for assessing the legitimacy of identity-based political practices, particularly within a Muslim-majority constitutional democracy (Pribadi, 2021).

Accordingly, a significant research gap remains. Previous studies have rarely synthesized empirical analyses of political primordialism in Indonesia with the normative framework of Islamic constitutional law. Most have been limited to describing the phenomenon or offering broad normative recommendations without providing a comprehensive theoretical integration. Furthermore, relatively little attention has been devoted to examining how political actors and voters themselves construct and interpret identity-based preferences within specific socio-political contexts. Consequently, the subjective meanings underlying identity-based political behavior remain insufficiently explored (Sukti, 2022).

This study therefore seeks to examine the manifestation and construction of political primordialism in Indonesian democracy, to explore how political actors and voters understand identity-based preferences in leadership selection, and to analyze these practices through the normative lens of Islamic constitutional law.

From a theoretical perspective, this research contributes to the advancement of academic scholarship by integrating two bodies of literature that have largely developed independently, namely identity politics and Islamic constitutional law. By bridging these perspectives, the study offers a more comprehensive analytical framework for understanding the legitimacy of identity-based political practices in democratic societies. Practically, the findings are expected to provide valuable insights for policymakers, electoral institutions, and civil society organizations seeking to

strengthen substantive democracy while minimizing the adverse consequences of identity-based political mobilization.

The significance of this research is further reinforced by the growing influence of political primordialism in contemporary Indonesian democracy, particularly within the era of digital politics, where identity-based narratives can spread rapidly through online platforms. Unless critically examined, this trend may accelerate the transformation of democracy from a rational and deliberative process into one increasingly driven by emotional and exclusive identity considerations. Such developments not only threaten the quality of democratic governance but also undermine the normative principles of just, competent, and accountable leadership emphasized in both constitutional democracy and Islamic constitutional law (Testriono, 2024). Therefore, this study is expected to contribute not only to the development of constitutional and political scholarship but also to ongoing efforts to strengthen democratic quality and social cohesion in Indonesia.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research design using a descriptive-analytical approach to examine the phenomenon of political primordialism and identity-based voter preferences within Indonesia's democratic system. A qualitative approach was selected because it enables an in-depth exploration of the meanings, dynamics, and underlying factors shaping identity-based political behavior. The descriptive-analytical framework not only facilitates a systematic description of the phenomenon but also provides a critical analysis through the normative perspective of Islamic constitutional law.

To achieve the research objectives, this study combined normative juridical and sociological approaches. The normative juridical approach was employed to examine the principles of leadership and constitutional governance within Islamic constitutional law, particularly those concerning the legitimacy and normative qualifications of political leadership. Meanwhile, the sociological approach was utilized to understand the practical manifestations of identity politics within Indonesian society and to analyze how primordial affiliations influence voters' political preferences and electoral behavior.

The data were collected through an extensive library research method by reviewing relevant scholarly sources, including academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, conference proceedings, official documents, and other authoritative publications concerning democracy, identity politics, political primordialism, and Islamic constitutional law. These sources were selected based on their relevance to the research objectives and their contribution to the theoretical and empirical understanding of the issues under investigation.

The collected data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis. The analytical process involved data reduction, classification, interpretation, and synthesis to identify recurring themes,

conceptual patterns, and normative arguments relevant to the research questions. Through this analytical framework, the study seeks to explain how political primordialism shapes identity-based preferences in leadership selection and to critically evaluate these practices from the perspective of Islamic constitutional law. Ultimately, this approach provides a comprehensive understanding of the interaction between democratic practice, identity politics, and the normative principles governing political leadership within the Islamic constitutional tradition.

RESULT

The Construction and Meaning of Identity-Based Preferences in Indonesian Voter Behavior

Identity-based preferences rooted in ethnicity, religion, culture, and other primordial affiliations within Indonesia's democratic practice should not be understood as natural or inherent characteristics of voters. Rather, they are more appropriately viewed as socially constructed phenomena emerging from the complex interactions among political actors, the media, and broader social structures. From this perspective, identity is neither fixed nor immutable; instead, it is continuously constructed and reconstructed through discursive practices that link social affiliations with political preferences (Sobari W, 2023). Political actors play a central role in this process by strategically activating particular identities through the use of symbols, narratives, and collective representations to cultivate emotional connections with voters. Consequently, identity functions not merely as a social marker but also as an effective instrument of political mobilization for consolidating electoral support (Kreiss, 2020).

The construction of identity has become increasingly prominent in the digital era, where social media serves simultaneously as a platform for the production, dissemination, and amplification of identity-based discourses. Through algorithmic filtering and homophilic interaction patterns, digital platforms facilitate the formation of identity-based polarization while narrowing opportunities for rational public deliberation. Complex political issues are frequently simplified into binary identity narratives, making them more accessible and emotionally appealing to voters. Under these circumstances, identity is not only constructed by political elites but also reproduced by ordinary citizens through everyday digital communication, thereby reinforcing the social legitimacy of identity-based political preferences (Tornberg, 2021).

Nevertheless, voters should not be regarded as passive recipients of these identity constructions. Rather, they actively interpret and negotiate identity through their social experiences, positions within the social structure, and perceptions of contemporary political dynamics. For some

individuals, identity-based preferences represent a form of collective solidarity reflecting loyalty toward particular social communities (Tahir et al., 2024). In other contexts, shared identity is perceived as a source of political trust, where common religious, ethnic, or cultural backgrounds are considered indicators of shared values and more reliable representation of collective interests. Moreover, when political institutions are perceived as ineffective or untrustworthy, identity may function as a protective mechanism that provides voters with a sense of certainty and security in making electoral decisions (Judge B, 2024).

These interpretations suggest that identity-based preferences should not automatically be equated with political irrationality. Instead, they may represent a form of contextual rationality shaped by specific social and political circumstances. When political institutions are perceived as incapable of ensuring justice, accountability, or equitable representation, voters may rely on identity as an alternative basis for political decision-making. In this context, identity functions as a cognitive shortcut that enables individuals to navigate increasingly complex political information. However, this form of rationality remains inherently ambivalent. While it may strengthen the political representation of marginalized or cohesive social groups, it simultaneously risks diverting attention from candidates' competence, integrity, and policy capacity (Clarke N, 2021).

This ambivalence becomes considerably more problematic when identity-based preferences evolve into political exclusivism. Under such conditions, identity is no longer understood merely as a mechanism of representation but instead becomes a rigid boundary separating the perceived *ingroup* from the *outgroup*. Voters not only exhibit stronger support for candidates who share their identities but may also actively reject candidates belonging to different identity groups regardless of their qualifications or political competence. Such developments illustrate a shift from contextual rationality toward collective affect driven primarily by identity-based sentiments, thereby increasing the potential for social polarization and democratic fragmentation (Bornschier S, 2021).

Furthermore, the dominance of identity-based preferences is profoundly shaped by the broader social and political environment. Factors such as the intensity of electoral competition, elite mobilization strategies, levels of political literacy, and public trust in political institutions significantly influence the extent to which identity becomes a primary determinant of voting behavior. In highly competitive and polarized political environments, identity frequently emerges as the most effective instrument of electoral mobilization because it rapidly generates emotional attachment and group loyalty. Conversely, where political institutions enjoy higher levels of public trust and political discourse remains relatively rational and policy-oriented, the influence of identity

tends to diminish and is replaced by programmatic considerations centered on candidates' qualifications and policy agendas (May A, 2023).

Taken together, identity-based preferences within Indonesian democracy constitute a complex and multidimensional phenomenon. They are shaped not only by strategic political mobilization but also by the ways in which citizens interpret their social and political realities. Accordingly, understanding identity politics requires an analytical framework capable of integrating both structural and subjective dimensions. Such an approach avoids reducing identity politics to a mere manifestation of political irrationality while simultaneously acknowledging its profound implications for democratic quality, particularly with respect to the principles of meritocracy, inclusive representation, and public reason that underpin a healthy democratic system.

Political Primordialism and the Legitimacy Crisis of Political Leadership in Islamic Constitutional Law

The practice of political primordialism in leadership selection in Indonesia reflects not only the dynamics of contemporary socio-political life but also a fundamental shift in the basis of political legitimacy. From the perspective of Islamic constitutional law, particularly within the framework of *fiqh siyāsah*, the legitimacy of political leadership is not derived from identity affiliation but from the normative qualities embodied by the leader. In *Al-Aḥkām al-Sulṭāniyyah*, Al-Mawardi conceptualizes leadership as an institution established to preserve social order and uphold justice (Elok et al., 2025). Accordingly, a legitimate leader must possess essential qualifications, including *al-'adālah* (moral integrity), *al-kiḡāyah* (intellectual and administrative competence), and *al-amānah* (trustworthiness and accountability). Leadership in Islamic political thought is therefore fundamentally functional and ethical rather than representational in terms of ethnic, religious, or communal identity (As-sulthaniyyah, 2018).

Contemporary democratic practice in Indonesia, however, demonstrates a problematic transformation in which the legitimacy of political leadership has gradually shifted from normative qualifications toward affective legitimacy grounded in shared identity (Kurniati K, 2021). Political primordialism promotes the assumption that identity proximity constitutes the principal indicator of leadership suitability, thereby relegating objective criteria such as competence, integrity, and accountability to secondary importance. Under these circumstances, political leaders are increasingly elected not because of their capacity to realize justice and public welfare but because they are perceived as representatives of particular identity groups. This transformation signifies

more than a change in electoral preferences; it reflects an epistemological shift in the way society understands and legitimizes political leadership (Al-Ahkam as-Sultaniyyah.pdf, n.d.).

From a normative perspective, this phenomenon fundamentally contradicts the core principles of *fiqh siyāsah*. Drawing upon Al-Mawardi's political thought, identity may only be considered insofar as it does not undermine the principles of *al-kifāyah* and *al-'adālah*. Political primordialism, however, reverses this hierarchy by elevating identity to the primary source of political legitimacy while marginalizing competence and justice. Consequently, the concept of *amānah* is substantially reduced, as leadership ceases to be understood as a moral responsibility toward society as a whole and instead becomes a mandate to advance the interests of particular identity groups. In this respect, political primordialism not only diverges from the normative principles of Islamic political thought but also departs from the ethical objectives that underpin legitimate leadership (Yasir, 2024).

Furthermore, political primordialism has the potential to distort the principle of justice within Islamic constitutional law. In *fiqh siyāsah*, justice is universal and cannot be subordinated to the interests of particular groups. Nevertheless, when leaders are primarily selected on the basis of shared identity, there is a greater likelihood that public policies will disproportionately favor their supporting constituencies. This situation creates a democratic paradox: a political system intended to guarantee equality and equal representation may instead generate political exclusivism that acquires legitimacy through democratic electoral procedures. From the perspective of Islamic constitutional law, such a condition contradicts the fundamental objective of political leadership, namely the realization of *maṣlaḥah 'āmmah* (the public good) (Z, 2023).

The implications of political primordialism extend beyond electoral behavior to the normative consciousness of voters themselves. When identity becomes the principal criterion for evaluating political leadership, an implicit assumption emerges that shared identity is inherently synonymous with leadership suitability. This logic indirectly negates the principle of meritocracy, which constitutes one of the central pillars of leadership in *fiqh siyāsah*. Consequently, the issue should not merely be understood as a deviation in political practice but rather as a broader paradigm shift that threatens to erode the ethical foundations of democratic governance (Hanif, n.d.).

Nevertheless, it is important to avoid the simplistic assumption that Islamic political thought categorically rejects identity considerations. To a limited extent, shared values—including religious values may legitimately contribute to the development of political trust and social cohesion. However, *fiqh siyāsah* consistently positions identity as a secondary consideration rather

than the principal determinant of political leadership. Once identity supersedes competence, justice, and trustworthiness as the primary basis of political legitimacy, it loses its normative validity within the framework of Islamic constitutional law.

Although Al-Mawardi's political theory cannot be applied literally within the constitutional framework of a modern democratic state such as Indonesia, its fundamental normative principles remain highly relevant as a critical framework for evaluating contemporary political practices. Consequently, analyses of political primordialism should extend beyond merely describing empirical phenomena and incorporate normative evaluation demonstrating that the predominance of identity-based leadership selection represents a departure from the principles of justice, rationality, meritocracy, and the pursuit of public welfare that constitute the ethical foundations of political leadership (Zheng Y, 2021).

In conclusion, political primordialism within Indonesian democracy should be understood not merely as a sociological phenomenon but also as a manifestation of a normative crisis in the legitimacy of political leadership. It reflects a transformation from leadership grounded in *amānah* toward leadership based on identity affiliation, from universal justice toward group loyalty, and from meritocratic principles toward political exclusivism. From the perspective of Islamic constitutional law, this trajectory is not only normatively problematic but also poses a significant challenge to the ethical foundations that should guide democratic governance and legitimate political leadership.

Reconceptualizing Leadership in Islamic Constitutional Law for Modern Democracy

Reconceptualizing leadership within the framework of Islamic constitutional law requires more than merely reaffirming its normative principles; it must also demonstrate how these principles can be operationalized within contemporary political realities. In this regard, a model of leadership legitimacy based on public merit acquires practical significance only if it can provide a viable alternative to the logic of political primordialism that continues to shape leadership selection in Indonesia (Aqilah, R., Dkk, 2024).

Empirical evidence from Indonesia's electoral politics indicates that voter preferences are frequently influenced by identity-based narratives such as "choosing a candidate of the same religion," "supporting someone from the same ethnic group," or "electing a representative of the local culture." Within this context, identity functions as a cognitive shortcut that substitutes for a rational evaluation of candidates' qualifications. The proposed reconstruction rejects this logic by shifting the basis of political legitimacy from identity affiliation to public merit, whereby leadership is assessed according to objective qualifications rather than shared social identity (Pemerintahan & Mada, 2021).

To illustrate, under this framework, a candidate for regional executive office cannot derive political legitimacy solely from sharing the religious identity of the electoral majority. Instead, claims

of religious commitment must be translated into demonstrable indicators of public merit, including a proven record of equitable policymaking, effective public financial management, and a commitment to inclusive public service delivery. Where such claims cannot be substantiated through measurable performance and administrative competence, identity loses its independent political significance. This process represents the de-privatization of political identity, whereby identity is no longer automatically accepted as a sufficient basis for political choice but must instead withstand the scrutiny of public reason and objective evaluation.

Furthermore, the principle of *al-kifāyah* in Al-Mawardi's political thought should no longer be understood merely as an abstract moral qualification but should be operationalized through objective assessments of leadership competence. In practical terms, voters are encouraged to evaluate candidates based on measurable criteria, including administrative experience, demonstrated policy achievements, managerial capability, and other verifiable indicators of public performance (Sejati, 2023). Consequently, the central evaluative question shifts from "*Does this candidate belong to my social group?*" to "*Is this candidate capable of exercising political leadership effectively?*" Although seemingly straightforward, this transformation reflects a profound shift in the normative foundations of political legitimacy.

Similarly, the principle of *al-amānah* should be reconstructed as an institutionalized concept of public accountability. Within a modern democratic system, a political leader cannot be regarded as trustworthy merely because of religious symbolism or shared identity. Rather, trustworthiness must be demonstrated through institutional mechanisms that ensure transparency, accountability, and effective public oversight. Transparent budget management, access to public information, and evidence-based performance evaluation constitute concrete manifestations of *al-amānah* in contemporary governance. Accordingly, the assumption that identity automatically generates political trust is replaced by the principle that public trust must be earned through accountable institutions and responsible governance (Wulandari et al., 2026).

Likewise, the principle of *al-'adālah* should be reinterpreted as justice that can be evaluated through the tangible outcomes of public policy. For example, a leader belonging to the majority social group cannot legitimately claim political authority based solely on identity representation if governmental policies systematically disadvantage minority communities. Under this reconstructed framework, justice is measured not by who governs but by whether governance produces equitable outcomes for all members of society. Such an approach directly challenges the primordialist assumption that identity representation is inherently equivalent to political justice (Vanessa et al., 2025).

Nevertheless, this reconstruction does not assume that identity can or should be entirely removed from democratic politics. In pluralistic societies, identity will inevitably remain one of many factors influencing political preferences. The objective is therefore not to eliminate identity from political life but to discipline its role within democratic decision-making. Identity may continue to contribute to political judgment, provided that it does not supersede evaluations of competence, integrity, accountability, and commitment to justice. Voters may reasonably consider shared identity, but their final electoral decisions should ultimately be grounded in publicly verifiable standards of leadership merit.

Accordingly, this reconstructed model should not be understood as a purely abstract normative ideal but rather as a practical evaluative framework for assessing political leadership

within contemporary democracy. It reorients political legitimacy from affiliation-based recognition toward evidence-based evaluation and from symbolic legitimacy toward substantive legitimacy. Without such operationalization, the concept of leadership in Islamic constitutional law risks remaining merely a normative ideal with limited capacity to provide meaningful guidance or critical evaluation of democratic practices that continue to be dominated by the logic of political primordialism.

CONCLUSION

Identity-based preferences rooted in ethnicity, religion, culture, and other primordial affiliations within Indonesian democracy should be understood as socially constructed phenomena emerging from the interactions among political actors, the media, and citizens' lived social experiences. Over time, identity has evolved beyond its function as a cultural marker to become a political instrument capable of fostering group solidarity while simultaneously reinforcing exclusivism toward out-groups. This transformation has significantly influenced political behavior by encouraging voters to prioritize identity affinity over objective assessments of candidates' competence, integrity, and leadership capacity.

The predominance of primordial considerations reveals a substantial gap between contemporary democratic practice and the normative principles of leadership embedded in Islamic constitutional law, which emphasize justice, competence, trustworthiness, and public responsibility as the primary foundations of political legitimacy. This study therefore proposes a reconceptualization of leadership through a model of **public merit-based legitimacy**, in which leadership is evaluated according to measurable standards of competence, justice, accountability, and commitment to the public interest rather than identity affiliation.

Within this framework, identity remains recognized as an inseparable component of social reality and democratic politics. However, it should function only as a secondary consideration and must not supersede substantive evaluations of leadership quality. Leadership consistent with both the principles of Islamic constitutional law and the demands of a democratic constitutional state should be grounded in meritocracy, inclusiveness, and public accountability. Accordingly, the proposed reconstruction offers both a normative and practical framework for strengthening Indonesian democracy by redirecting political legitimacy from primordial sentiment toward rational, evidence-based assessments of leadership quality. Such a paradigmatic shift constitutes an essential prerequisite for realizing democratic governance that is more just, inclusive, accountable, and consistently oriented toward the promotion of the public good.

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