

MODERATED IDENTITY POLITICS: MUSLIM VOTERS AND RELIGIOUS DEPOLARIZATION IN NORTH MALUKU'S 2024 GUBERNATORIAL ELECTION

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ABSTRACT. This study examines religious polarization in North Maluku, proposing moderated identity politics and a hybrid representation model to explain post-conflict electoral behavior. It highlights local leaders who strategically balance identity appeals with cross-group alliances, integrating structural and agential factors to advance electoral theory and offer a replicable model for mitigating identity-based conflict in plural Indonesian regions. Using a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design, quantitative data were first collected from 100 proportionally sampled respondents. Subsequently, in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with 17 key informants. Data triangulation, comparing survey results with interview findings, ensured consistency and strengthened the validity of the research conclusions. The study presents four novel contribution findings. First, it challenges conventional religious voting, demonstrating Sherly Tjoanda's Catholic victory in a Muslim-majority province, attributed to economic pragmatism, political legacy, and networks over religious affiliation. Second, it introduces the Hybrid Representation Model, combining development performance with a moderate religious figure. Third, it refines voter decision-making through Post-Conflict Electoral Rationality and welfare populism, illustrating how trauma fosters pragmatism. Finally, it develops Moderated Identity Politics, integrating local factors like Nahdlatul Ulama's influence and conflict trauma to reduce polarization and promote electoral pragmatism. The 2024 North Maluku gubernatorial election, with the Sherly-Sarbin ticket's victory, exemplified pragmatic considerations outweighing religious identity. This model outcome establishes Moderated Identity Politics that can depolarize elections by endorsing competence-based, cross-faith alliances, and prioritizes a competence-plus-credibility approach. In contexts with a dominant, moderate Islamic organization and where economic competition is not a zero-sum game.

Keywords: Moderated identity politics; Muslim voters; religious depolarization; gubernatorial election; North Maluku.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of moderate Islam is rooted in the Quran (Surah Al-Baqarah verse 143), which promotes a balanced, middle-way community or *ummatan wasathan* (Shallabi, 2020: 16). This approach seeks to achieve Islamic goals through peaceful and lawful means, giving greater importance to non-religious leadership for addressing welfare issues (Benkin, 2017: 26; Tripathi, 2017: 139). Indonesia is often viewed as a leading example of this concept (Hefner, 2018: 213). However, the application of this concept becomes complex during elections, especially when religious identity dominates political discourse (Alvian and Ardhani, 2023).

In the 2024 North Maluku gubernatorial election, religious identity politics, a common polarizing factor in Indonesian elections, was successfully minimized. This was achieved through a moderation approach rooted in local wisdom, which effectively countered the typical manipulation of moderate Islam narratives for electoral gain (Inayatillah, 2022; Akmaliah, 2022). The region's political elites played a crucial role by prioritizing development issues over religious identity, thereby

strengthening social cohesion during the campaign period (Pektas, 2021). Furthermore, the integration of local Sufism values into political discourse helped to reduce inter-group tensions, creating a bridge between different Muslim sects and fostering a more inclusive electoral environment (Anshori, 2021; Alvian and Ardhani, 2023).

Polarization fueled by identity politics during elections is a serious challenge in Indonesia (Harahap, et al., 2025: 51; Alek & Raswan, 2024: 119). To counter this, *moderated identity politics* guides Muslim voters toward supporting broader agendas that transcend exclusive religious issues (Iner & Yucel, 2015: 63). This approach reconciles Islamic values with secular principles, where the economy was a more decisive factor than religion (Monshipouri, 2011: 150). This framework is relevant to the concept of religious depolarization, where religion-based tensions in the political sphere diminish (Etzioni, 2021: 32). Despite challenges, depolarization efforts can be strengthened by the role of moderate Muslim leaders and organizations that bridge religious values and inclusive political goals (Kingston, 2019: 83; Mazrui, 2014: 16). This fosters a social Islamization from below (de Haan & Lok,

2019: 230), with its success depending on moderate elite pacts and moderate voter attitudes (Hiariej & Stokke, 2022: 276). Elections in Indonesia (2018 & 2019) demonstrate the crucial role of Muslim voters in election outcomes (Sebastian & Arifianto, 2020), proving they can be key agents in creating a more inclusive and harmonious society through a moderate approach.

The electoral dynamics in North Maluku also reflect the complex interplay between structural and cultural factors in shaping Muslim voter preferences (Tabroni, 2023). In contrast to patterns observed in Java, where identity politics are often exploited (Meyer, 2024), voters in North Maluku are demonstrably more responsive to economic issues and equitable development (Wahyuningtyas, et al., 2025; Ayunda, et al., 2025). These findings align with research on the Sherly-Sarbin case, which indicates that a hybrid representation model can effectively reduce social fragmentation (Vintila, 2024). Furthermore, the involvement of Islamic organizations like Nahdlatul Ulama as conflict mediators strengthens integration between minority and majority groups (Selamat, 2023), and also with inclusive approach to successful depolarization (Lee, 2024).

The preferences of Muslim voters in North Maluku cannot be seen solely through the lens of religious identity, but are also influenced by unique socio-geographical factors (Mehrez, 2025). Populism sentiment can be defeated by a pragmatic narrative based on welfare (Anzarut, 2025). A similar thing happened in North Maluku, where the electability of candidates is determined by their capacity to answer real community problems, such as access to education and infrastructure (Petrocik, 2024). Arter's (2024) findings on the importance of "out-of-district" candidates in increasing voter participation are also relevant to the context of North Maluku, where non-local figures have managed to gain cross-group support. Thus, the case of the 2024 North Maluku gubernatorial election offers a new perspective on how moderated identity politics can create a more inclusive electoral space (Peeters, 2024).

The urgency of this research lies in its potential to fill three theoretical gaps at once: (1) the inconsistency of identity politics in post-conflict areas, (2) the untested hybrid representation model (minority-majority) in plural areas, and (3) the role of religious institutions (NU) as an alternative political machine that shifts traditional clientelism (Noak, 2024). By comparing the findings of Sumaktoyo (2021), Sembiring (2023), and Noak (2024), this study will examine whether the dominant theories

about religious polarization are still relevant in the context of North Maluku or need to be modified with new approaches such as post-conflict electoral rationality.

The scientific novelty of this research lies in three aspects. First, the concept of moderated identity politics as a framework for analyzing identity politics that is dynamic and contextualized by local factors such as the NU network and conflict trauma. Second, the Sherly-Sarbin hybrid representation model as an example of successful minority-majority integration in an often polarized electoral system. Third, the approach of electoral rationality in post-conflict societies shifts the focus of the study from religious polarization to the rational preferences of voters in ex-conflict areas.

This research addresses a notable gap in the literature concerning identity politics and electoral outcomes by focusing on North Maluku, a region where religious identity is uniquely moderated by powerful Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) networks and historical conflict trauma, a dynamic not fully explained by existing models of religious polarization (Sumaktoyo, 2021). Furthermore, current minority representation theories (Sembiring, 2023) fail to account for the strategic importance of a moderate Muslim running mate in securing the victory of a non-Muslim candidate. Therefore, this study aims to explore how cultural dynamics, NU influence, and conflict-related trauma shape the identity political preferences of Muslim voters in North Maluku, and to identify the key drivers of electoral support for a mixed religious ticket, exemplified by the Sherly-Sarbin pair, by analyzing the interplay of cultural dynamics, identity politics, and narrative strategies.

This research proposes a new framework of moderated identity politics to analyze post-conflict electoral behavior in plural regions like North Maluku. Departing from institutional-focused theories, this model emphasizes the strategic agency of local leaders and politicians who deliberately temper divisive identity appeals while maintaining symbolic representation. This approach is complemented by a hybrid representation model, which examines how candidates blend symbolic ethno-religious appeals with pragmatic cross-group alliances, a dynamic that emerges organically from the region's historical trauma and elite pragmatism. By integrating structural and agential factors, this study advances post-conflict electoral theory and offers a unique, grassroots-driven equilibrium model that can be replicated in other plural Indonesian regions, providing valuable policy recommendations for mitigating identity-based electoral conflict.

METHOD

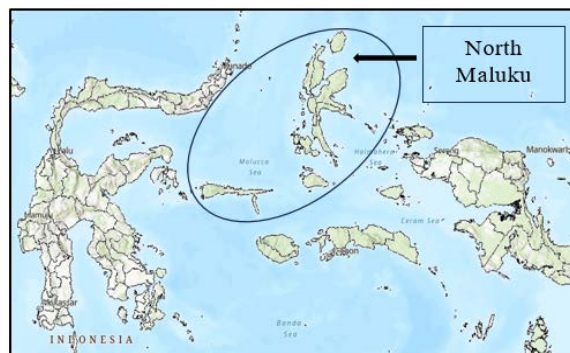
This research adopts a mixed methods approach with a sequential explanatory design, as described by Creswell & Clark (2011: 104); Clark & Creswell (2008: 178); and Tashakkori & Teddlie (2003). This approach strategically combines two sequential stages of data collection to achieve a comprehensive understanding. The first stage of this research focuses on quantitative data collection. This data was obtained by distributing questionnaires to 100 respondents across 10 districts/cities in North Maluku Province. The research scope covers North Halmahera, East Halmahera, West Halmahera, Central Halmahera, South Halmahera Regencies, as well as Ternate City, Tidore Islands City, Morotai Island, Sula Islands, and Taliabu Island. This quantitative sample frame was designed proportionally to encompass a broad demographic diversity, including Religious representation in the sample was designed to reflect North Maluku's demographics (mid-2024 estimates indicate Islam at 74.28%, Protestantism at 24.9%, and Catholicism at 0.52%), age (25-70 years), gender (55% male, 45% female), education level (20% primary school, 40% junior/senior high school, 40% higher education), and social strata (30% lower, 50% middle, 20% elite). This sampling design aims to ensure that the initial data collected is comprehensive and representative, while minimizing potential bias.

After the quantitative data analysis, the second stage proceeds with qualitative data collection to deepen the findings from the initial survey. This data was obtained through in-depth semi-structured interviews with 17 key informants, selected from the initial group of 100 respondents using a purposive sampling technique. The selection of key informants was strategically done to capture nuanced and rich perspectives from various parties directly involved as voters in the 2024 North Maluku gubernatorial election. The criteria for informant selection were based on their experiences, including former combatants, religious leaders, female conflict victims, and multicultural youth. This multidimensional qualitative sample design is strategically crafted to uncover diverse experiences and views from each group, thus providing a profound understanding.

The implementation of data collection in North Maluku presents geographical complexities as an archipelagic province, requiring significant effort to reach respondents and informants in 10 different locations. Therefore, this detailed methodological design is crucial to ensure that the collected data remains accurate and relevant. Ultimately, this multidimensional sample design not only adheres to methodological standards but is also specifically

designed to generate findings relevant to the unique context of North Maluku, while contributing to broader theoretical discussions on identity politics in post-conflict regions.

In this research, mixed methods data analysis is key to holistically understanding the phenomenon. This process involves correlating variables measured quantitatively, such as Muslim voters' political preferences and electoral support, which are then visualized using the Datawrapper Application. These broad quantitative findings are then enriched and further explained through qualitative narratives obtained from in-depth interviews. This integrated approach effectively bridges measurable statistical findings with richer context and meaning. Thus, this mixed methods approach not only ascertains what happened from the quantitative data analysis results, but also why and how through qualitative data. The synergy between these two types of data allows for a comprehensive and profound understanding of the dynamics of Muslim identity politics in the 2024 North Maluku gubernatorial election.



Source : Badan Informasi Geospasial. (2023). *RBI 1:50000 Wilayah Administrasi Kab/Kot.*

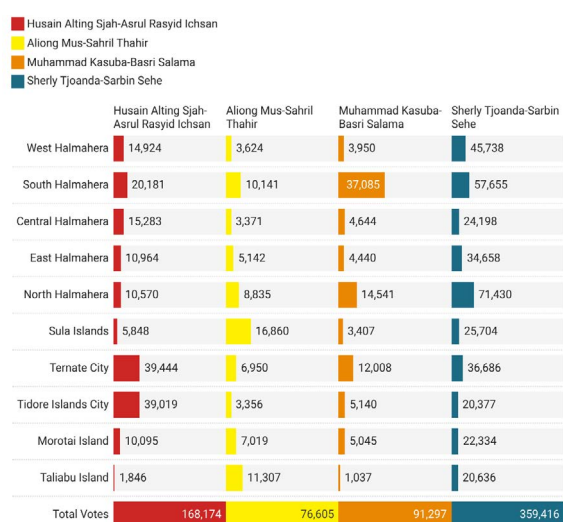
Figure 1. North Maluku Map

Based on Figure 1 above, the map above shows that North Maluku Province comprises major islands such as Halmahera (with various regencies including West Halmahera, North Halmahera, East Halmahera, Central Halmahera, and South Halmahera), Ternate Island, Tidore Islands, Morotai Island, Sula Islands, and Taliabu Island. The arrow indicates North Maluku's geographical location within the context of Indonesia's map. Given the geographical complexity and cultural diversity of North Maluku's island communities, as illustrated in Figure 1, the study's methodological rigor was crucial to account for regional variations and sensitivities. While the map highlights North Maluku's fragmented island geography, the research also acknowledges how this spatial dispersion posed logistical challenges in data collection, particularly in reaching isolated or conflict-affected areas.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The 2024 North Maluku gubernatorial election saw the Sherly Tjoanda-Sarbin Sehe pair secure a unique victory with 359,416 votes (51.8%), despite Sherly being the sole non-Muslim (Catholic) candidate in a province where 72% of the population is Muslim. This outcome challenges theories of Muslim Identity Politics and Religious Voting Behavior, which typically predict religious identity as a primary electoral determinant. Sherly's win demonstrates that sympathy, economic influence, and robust political coalition building can supersede religious considerations. A significant emotional factor was the death of her husband, Benny Laos (former Morotai Regent), during the campaign, which garnered substantial support in North Halmahera (71,430 votes) and South Halmahera (57,655 votes)—regions with strong Islamic and ethnic identities, traditionally favoring a candidate like Muhammad Kasuba.

Furthermore, Sherly's background as an entrepreneur provided access to elite resources and networks, strengthening her coalition base. The fragmented vote among the three Muslim candidate pairs—Husain Alting Sjah-Asrul Rasyid Ichsan with 168,174 votes (24.2%), Muhammad Kasuba-Basri Salama with 91,297 votes (13.1%), and Aliong Mus-Sahril Thahir with 76,605 votes (11%)—underscores the failure of religious identity to consolidate votes. This fragmentation, with candidates like Husain Alting excelling in Ternate City (39,444 votes) due to Muslim support, and Muhammad Kasuba relying on his former regency base in South Halmahera (37,085 votes), reveals that Islamic politics in North Maluku is not homogenous; kinship, incumbency, and local networks prove more influential than purely religious narratives.



Source: KPU of North Maluku Province.

Figure 2. The 2024 North Maluku Gubernatorial Election Vote results

Moderated Identity Politics: Muslim Voters and Religious Depolarization in North Maluku's 2024 Gubernatorial Election
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As illustrated in Figure 2, the 2024 North Maluku gubernatorial election results reveal a significant outcome, whereby the Sherly Tjoanda-Sarbin Sehe pair emerged victorious with a commanding 359,416 votes, constituting 51.8% of the total. This landslide victory presents a unique phenomenon, especially considering that Sherly is of Catholic faith in a province where 74.75% of the population identifies as Muslim. Consequently, this outcome challenges conventional political theories that often posit religious identity as a primary determinant of electoral choices. Instead, Sherly's triumph underscores the decisive impact of other factors, including public sympathy following her husband Benny Laos's death, robust economic connections, and the formation of strong political coalitions that evidently resonated with a diverse electorate.

Beyond these overarching factors, a closer examination of the individual candidate performances further illuminates the nuanced interplay of local political dynamics and personal influence within the North Maluku electoral landscape. The performance of Muslim candidates Muhammad Kasuba and Aliong Mus further highlights the importance of local political power. Kasuba, a two-term Regent of South Halmahera, secured 37,085 votes in that region. Similarly, Aliong Mus, a former Regent, garnered 16,860 votes in the Sula Islands and 11,307 votes in Taliabu Island—his strongholds. This aligns with local patronage politics, where a candidate's electability is linked to constituent proximity and governmental track record. Sherly also benefited from her late husband's political legacy, demonstrating how political dynasty and emotional voter connection can erode religious polarization.

The election marks a shift towards pragmatic considerations like development, stability, and leadership. While Muslim candidates Husain Alting Sjah-Asrul Rasyid Ichsan (168,174 votes, 24.2%), Muhammad Kasuba-Basri Salama (91,297 votes, 13.1%), and Aliong Mus-Sahril Thahir (76,605 votes, 11%) failed to consolidate the Muslim vote, their localized successes confirm that Muslim identity remains relevant but is no longer a singular winning factor. This demonstrates North Maluku's increasingly dynamic democracy, blending identity, emotion, and pragmatism in voter behavior.

The Identity Political Preferences of Muslim Voters in North Maluku

The data from North Maluku's ten regions reveals a complex interplay of religious factors, local needs, and neutral sentiments influencing voter preferences in the 2024 gubernatorial election. Each

region's unique characteristics, shaped by historical, cultural, and socio-political dynamics, contributed to these varied patterns.

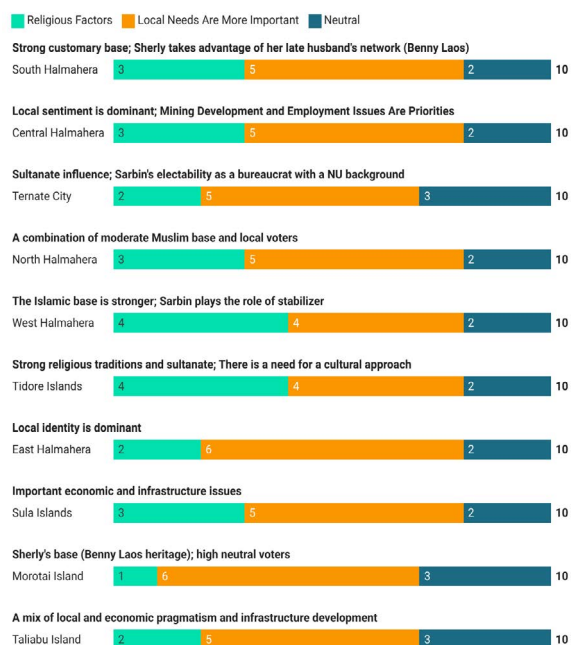
In South Halmahera and Central Halmahera, local needs emerged as the dominant force, scoring 5, significantly outweighing religious factors (3) and neutral sentiments (2). This indicates that while religion plays a moderate role, voters are primarily driven by pragmatic concerns like mining development and employment. A 52-year-old Muslim traditional leader in South Halmahera stated, *"Sherly understands our mining issues. Her late husband Benny Laos fought for our land rights. Religion matters, but jobs matter more—we won't eat from prayers alone. The candidate who guarantees our mines stay open gets our votes."* Similarly, a 38-year-old Muslim small trader in Central Halmahera underlined, *"The mosque reminds us to vote wisely, but the mine feeds our children. We trust Sherly because her family helped us during the conflict. Also, Sarbin's NU background is good."* The strong customary base in these regions and Sherly's leverage of Sarbin's Nahdlatul Ulama's network further underscore the importance of local alliances and political legacy.

Ternate City exhibited unique dynamics, with a stronger emphasis on neutral sentiments (3) compared to other regions, while religious factors scored 2 and local needs remained high at 5. The influence of the Sultanate and Sarbin's electability as a bureaucrat with an NU background reflect a blend of cultural and institutional power. The higher neutral score suggests a more diverse urban electorate, likely prioritizing competence and governance over purely local or religious appeals. A 28-year-old Christian university student in Ternate remarked, *"I respect the Sultanate, but I'm tired of identity politics. Sarbin's clean record as a bureaucrat is rare. Here, young voters care about combating corruption, not debates about politically motivated candidates based on religion."*

Moving northward, North Halmahera demonstrated a balance between a moderate Muslim base (3) and strong local voter priorities (5), with neutral sentiments at 2. This suggests a region where religion and local identity coexist without one dominating. In contrast, West Halmahera showed religious identity gaining prominence, with a higher religious influence (4), local needs also scoring 4, and neutral sentiments at 2. A 45-year-old Muslim Islamic school teacher in West Halmahera noted, *"Sarbin's NU ties reassure us that he will protect Islamic values, and we also demand jobs to support our families—no more exploitation of Iron Ore mining along the Loloda sub-district waters."*

"We want religion and justice to go hand in hand." This highlights a significant balance between religious identity and local needs in shaping political outcomes.

A similar duality, with a stronger cultural dimension, was observed in the Tidore Islands. Here, strong religious traditions (4) and a need for a cultural approach were evident, alongside local needs also scoring 4, and neutral sentiments at 2. The enduring influence of the Sultanate emphasized the importance of cultural and religious harmony. A 33-year-old Muslim cultural activist from the Tidore Islands stressed, *"The Sultan's blessing matters, but so does preserving our traditions. Candidates must speak our language—literally. Tidore won't accept outsiders dictating development."* This indicates that any political strategy in Tidore must account for the community's deep-rooted religious and cultural values, as these are as influential as economic concerns.



Source: Processed Data with Datawrapper Application.

Figure 3. The Identity Political Preferences of Muslim Voters in North Maluku

Further enriching the analysis of electoral dynamics in North Maluku, Figure 3 provides crucial insights into the specific political preferences of Muslim voters, indicates that Muslim voter behavior is primarily shaped by pragmatic local needs and concerns, rather than solely religious factors. While religious elements are present, the data consistently shows *"Local Needs Are More Important"* as a key driver, alongside the influence of customary bases, political networks, and local leadership. This demonstrates a pragmatic, context-dependent approach to electoral choices among Muslim voters.

The analysis of voter preferences across North Maluku's ten regions reveals a complex interplay of

religious factors, local needs, and neutral sentiments in the 2024 gubernatorial election. Each region, shaped by unique historical, cultural, and socio-political dynamics, exhibited distinct patterns. In East Halmahera, local identity overwhelmingly dominated, with a local needs score of 6, significantly overshadowing religious (2) and neutral (2) scores. A 70-year-old Muslim tribal elder exemplified this, stating, *"We don't care about party labels. Who will return our ancestral lands? Sherly's team promised to resolve this. That's all we ask."* This indicates a strong focus on community-specific development.

The Sula Islands prioritized economic development, scoring local needs 5, religious factors 3, and neutral sentiments 2. A 40-year-old Muslim fisherman articulated this, *"Infrastructure first! Our boats rot while politicians debate piety. Both the church and the mosque support Sherly because she delivers roads, not just rhetoric."* Morotai Island presented a striking deviation, with neutral sentiments peaking at 3, alongside high local needs (6) and a very low religious factor (1). This suggests a highly pragmatic electorate, influenced by the legacy of Sherly's late husband, Benny Laos. A 22-year-old Christian college graduate from Morotai confirmed, *"Benny Laos' legacy is strong here. Sherly wins by default. Religion? Irrelevant. We judge leaders by results, not prayers."*

Taliabu Island showed a blend of pragmatism and local focus: local needs 5, neutral sentiments 3, and religious factors 2. A 35-year-old Muslim civil servant remarked, *"We're split: some want a Muslim gubernatorial candidate, while others just want electricity. The connection between Sherly and Sarbin as moderate bureaucratic figures helps; we're confident the pair can build the Taliabu island ring road."* Overall, local needs consistently scored high (averaging 4.9), while religious factors varied significantly (from 1 in Morotai to 4 in West Halmahera and Tidore Islands). Neutral sentiments were generally lower but notable in urban and specific island areas. These insights highlight the necessity for tailored political strategies that respect regional nuances, balancing local development, religious values, and pragmatic governance.

Electoral Support for the Sherly-Sarbin Pair in North Maluku: Cultural Dynamics, Identity Politics, and Narrative Strategies.

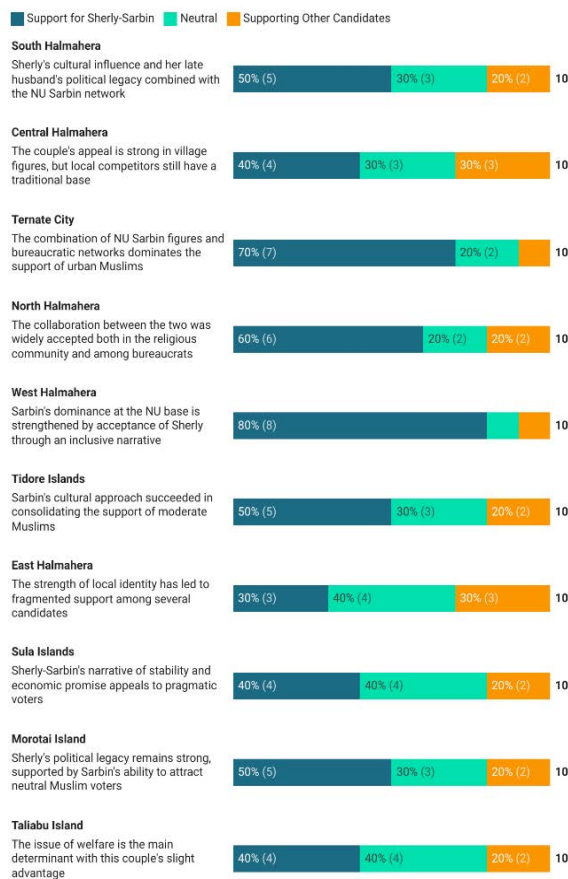
The 2024 North Maluku gubernatorial election saw the Sherly-Sarbin duo establish a strong lead with 51% average support across the province, leaving their three opponents with a combined 20%, and a significant 29% of voters undecided. In Ternate City, the capital, Sherly-Sarbin's dominance

was even more pronounced, securing 70% of the vote compared to their opponents' 10%, with 20% undecided. This strong urban appeal is attributed to Sarbin's bureaucratic background and their campaign's emphasis on infrastructure and economic growth, bolstered by religious networks. An urban Muslim voter highlighted the trust in Sarbin's experience and the influence of mosques, while noting youth concerns about job opportunities.

A Chinese-Indonesian shop owner also expressed appreciation for Sherly-Sarbin's inclusive rhetoric, indicating that their pluralist appeal resonated with minority groups. However, the shop owner, like many undecided voters, is awaiting concrete policy details, particularly regarding fair trade licenses. The remaining undecided voters in Ternate City present an opportunity for rival candidates to gain ground by addressing urban middle-class concerns such as housing affordability and public services.

The analysis of these findings regarding the electoral dynamics in North Maluku reveals a complex interplay of factors contributing to the Sherly-Sarbin pair's support. While Figure 4 above provides a breakdown of "Support," "Neutral" (undecided), and "Supporting Other Candidates" percentages across 10 regions, the qualitative sub-indicators are crucial for understanding the underlying mechanisms. The findings demonstrate that electoral success is not solely predicated on a single narrative, such as broad religious appeals. Instead, it is deeply rooted in localized contexts, where cultural legacies (like Sherly's in South Halmahera and Morotai), established political networks (like NU Sarbin's across several regions), the persuasive appeal of local figures, and the influence of urban bureaucratic structures (Ternate City) play significant roles. (Figure 4).

Furthermore, the ability to foster religious and community acceptance, craft inclusive narratives, adopt culturally sensitive approaches (Tidore Islands), acknowledge and integrate strong local identities (East Halmahera), and address tangible voter concerns such as promises of stability and economic welfare (Sula Islands, Taliabu Island) are all vital for garnering and consolidating support. The consistent presence of a "Neutral" segment across regions also highlights the ongoing challenge of fully capturing voter allegiance and the potential for shifts in support based on evolving circumstances or targeted rival campaigns. Ultimately, the findings underscore that a successful electoral strategy in North Maluku necessitates a highly tailored, multi-faceted approach that resonates with diverse regional specificities rather than a monolithic message.



Source: Processed Data with Datawrapper Application.

Figure 4. Electoral Support for the Sherly-Sarbin Pair in North Maluku: Cultural Dynamics, Identity Politics, and Narrative Strategies.

However, the contrasting 30% support in East Halmahera—with 40% undecided—reveals the limitations of such a coalition. Here, strong sub-ethnic identities (e.g., Maba, Patani, Javanese minority dominated by Muslims, as well as Tobelo communities predominantly Protestant Christian, and Galela who are Muslim minority) foster distrust towards “outsider” candidates (Sherly is perceived as Ternate-centric), combined with grievances over resource allocation. A Former Muslim Combatant (Tobelo, North Halmahera, Male, 60, Lower Class, Middle Education) articulated this sentiment: *“I am skeptical. Sherly is seen as a Ternate elite—why would she care about us? I still have little trust. We have ancestral lands that have been unresolved since being taken over by the Dutch Colonial administration for coconut plantations in the 1930s. After Indonesia’s independence, this land ownership conflict remains unresolved to this day. We are here waiting to see if Sherly-Sarbin can resolve this? They are waiting for guarantees of land rights.”* This underscores how ethno-regional pride and historical marginalization fuel resistance to “outsider” candidates.

In East Halmahera, Sherly-Sarbin garners 30% support, mirroring their opponents.

A 65-year-old Protestant Pastor from East Halmahera noted that support stems from the dominant Christian Tobelo ethnic group, who prioritize unity. However, the Maba and Patani tribes, who comprise the undecided 30%, still back Sultan Tidore, Husain Alting, as a gubernatorial candidate due to concerns about resource inequality. The Chinese Minority Trader in Buli Sarani village (male, 56) explained his support for Sherly-Sarbin by adapting to the strong local identity of the Christian Buli and Muslim Maba ethnicity. This highlights that deeply rooted and localized political cultures are crucial in East Halmahera.

Moving to the Sula Islands and Taliabu, Sherly-Sarbin holds a fragile 40% lead, with 40% of voters still undecided. A 60-year-old Christian Fisherman from Mangoli, Sula Islands, articulated, *“I am among the undecided. Sherly-Sarbin talks about ‘development,’ but as fishermen, we need motorboats for fishing, to sell our catch and meet daily needs here, not vague promises.”* This underscores how geographical isolation prioritizes tangible needs like fishing subsidies in Sula and road access in Taliabu, rendering broad religious campaigns ineffective.

In Central Halmahera, 40% support for Sherly-Sarbin reflects agrarian collectivism, with farmers prioritizing crop subsidies. However, 30% remain undecided due to past failures in land rights. A 52-year-old Rural Christian Farmer from Central Halmahera emphasized, *“We need crop subsidies, not religious slogans. I want the Sherly-Sarbin duo because they visited our village, but older farmers remember broken promises of land rights. If rivals offer concrete help, they will sway the undecided.”* Economic pragmatism here significantly dampens religious solidarity, forcing identity politics to adapt to livelihood realities.

Tidore shows 50% support for Sherly-Sarbin, rooted in the historical role of its sultanate as a Muslim political mediator, requiring campaigns to frame through cultural kinship rather than overt religiosity. A 35-year-old Muslim Staple Goods Store Owner from Tidore Islands explained, *“My support for the Sherly-Sarbin duo in Tidore is not about religion—it’s about the more moderate kinship on Sarbin’s character as a moderate Muslim.”*

Conversely, Morotai Island exhibits 50% support for Sherly-Sarbin, with 30% undecided, prioritizing port security issues related to its strategic border location. A 30-year-old Interfaith Activist in Morotai asserted, *“Those who are still undecided here care about port security, not piety. Sherly-Sarbin’s campaign has not addressed our border issues—until they do.”* This indicates secular

concerns depolarizing religious voting. Similarly, the South Halmahera mining sector shows 50% support for Sherly-Sarbin, with 30% undecided, where Islamic credentials are less important than promises of royalty transparency. A 38-year-old Muslim Miner in South Halmahera articulated, “*We gave them support because they promised to audit mining royalties. Religion? Secondary. If opponents offer better transparency, even devout Muslims will switch their votes.*” In North Halmahera, Sherly-Sarbin’s support stands at 60%, with 20% undecided, indicating broad acceptance in both religious and bureaucratic communities.

The high neutrality in East Halmahera (40%) and Sula-Taliabu (40%) highlights vulnerabilities in Sherly-Sarbin’s outreach. Undecided voters in East Halmahera reject religious appeals due to ethno-regional pride, demanding promises of decentralization, while Sula-Taliabu’s neutrality reflects distrust of broad promises, necessitating candidate visibility. This provincial disparity suggests that depolarization requires tailored approaches. Finally, the urban-rural divide further complicates the narrative, with Ternate’s stable support contrasting with rural hesitancy, where dissatisfaction is linked to spatial marginalization. The 51% average campaign support conceals these fissures, which opponents could exploit by reframing dispossession as a betrayal of Islamic solidarity.

In summary, the variation between West Halmahera’s coalition hegemony, East Halmahera’s identity-based resistance, and Sula’s hyper-localism indicates that moderate Muslim politics in North Maluku is not a monolith. Instead, religious depolarization succeeds where elite bargaining overlaps with voter livelihoods (West), falters where sub-identities dominate (East), and adapts where geographical or economic niches dictate (Sula, Tidore, Morotai, South Halmahera, North Halmahera). Without a detailed region-by-region analysis, a broader narrative of moderated identity politics risks oversimplifying the complex interplay of faith, governance, and local agency within North Maluku’s political landscape.

The victory of the Sherly Tjoanda-Sarbin Sehe ticket in the 2024 North Maluku gubernatorial election, securing 51.8% of the votes, presents a fascinating anomaly. It challenges conventional theories of Muslim identity politics and religious polarization. Theories of Religious Voting Behavior (Sumaktoyo, 2021) and Muslim Identity Politics (Alvian, 2023), which posit the dominance of religious identity in voter preferences, are significantly weakened in this context. Sherly, a Catholic candidate in a province

with a 72% Muslim majority, managed to win due to factors like economic power, political networks, and the political legacy of her late husband, Benny Laos. An interview with a 52-year-old Muslim traditional leader in South Halmahera strongly supports this: “*Sherly understands our mining issues. Her late husband Benny Laos fought for our land rights. Religion matters, but jobs matter more—we won’t eat from prayers alone. The candidate who guarantees our mines stay open gets our votes.*” This statement directly refutes the assumption that religion is the primary determinant, instead highlighting the more dominant economic pragmatism.

Conversely, these findings align with Theories of Local Patronage Politics (Pektas, 2021) and the Hybrid Representation Model (Vintila, 2024). Sherly-Sarbin’s victory was driven by a combination of substantive representation (development performance associated with Benny Laos and Sherly’s promises) and descriptive representation (Sarbin as a moderate local NU figure). The fragmentation of the Muslim vote among the three other candidates—Husain Alting Sjah-Asrul Rasyid Ichsan (24.2%), Muhammad Kasuba-Basri Salama (13.1%), and Aliong Mus-Sahril Thahir (11%)—demonstrates a failure of vote consolidation based purely on religious identity. This is further reinforced by the testimony of a 38-year-old Muslim small trader in Central Halmahera: “*The mosque reminds us to vote wisely, but the mine feeds our children. We trust Sherly because her family helped us during the conflict. Also, Sarbin’s NU background is good.*” This blend of emotional support, economic networks, and connections to broadly accepted local figures suggests that electability is not solely about a single identity, but rather a synergy of various elements.

The research findings on North Maluku’s electoral dynamics are supported by Theories of Welfare Populism Sentiment (Anzarut, 2025) and Post-Conflict Electoral Rationality (Noak, 2024). A populist narrative prioritizing welfare successfully overcame religious sentiment, as voters, shaped by past conflict trauma, prioritized reconciliation and stability. A 28-year-old Christian university student in Ternate affirmed, “*I respect the Sultanate, but I’m tired of identity politics. Sarbin’s clean record as a bureaucrat is rare. Here, young voters care about combating corruption, not debates about politically motivated candidates based on religion.*” This signifies a shift from narrow identity affiliations to broader governance and welfare concerns. Conversely, Clientelism Theory (Sembiring, 2023) was not substantiated, as the NU network functioned as a mediator, not a transactional force.

Paradoxically, dominant theories like Religious Polarization Theory (Sumaktoyo, 2021) are weakened here, failing to explain the fragmentation of Muslim voters. Instead, Moderated Identity Politics Theory (Inayatillah, 2022) and Electoral Pragmatism (Petrocik, 2024) mutually reinforce, highlighting local wisdom and non-religious issues in reducing polarization. This is evident regionally. In East Halmahera, a 60-year-old former Muslim combatant expressed skepticism: *“I am skeptical. Sherly is seen as a Ternate elite—why would she care about us? We have ancestral lands that have been unresolved since being taken over by the Dutch. We are waiting to see if Sherly-Sarbin can resolve this?”* In Morotai, a 22-year-old Christian college graduate noted, *“Benny Laos’ legacy is strong here. Sherly wins by default—no one else has his trust. Religion? Irrelevant. We judge leaders by results, not prayers.”* This disparity underscores the dynamic and contextual nature of identity politics in North Maluku, demanding a flexible analytical framework.

This research offers four significant novelties for understanding identity politics in diverse, post-conflict societies. *Firstly*, it fundamentally challenges conventional theories of religious voting behavior. The surprising victory of Sherly Tjoanda, a Catholic candidate in a predominantly Muslim province, directly refutes the long-held assumption that religious affiliation is the primary determinant of electoral success. Instead, the study reveals that economic pragmatism, political legacy (e.g., Benny Laos’s development record), and robust networks are more decisive, pushing scholarly discourse towards a more nuanced understanding where material interests and historical ties can supersede confessional allegiances.

Secondly, it introduces a novel “Sherly-Sarbin Hybrid Representation Model”. This innovative framework integrates substantive representation (development performance) with descriptive representation (a locally legitimate, moderate religious figure like Sarbin Sehe from NU).

Thirdly, the study significantly refines the understanding of voter decision-making in sensitive contexts by emphasizing Post-Conflict Electoral Rationality and the rise of welfare populism. It argues that past conflict trauma fosters pragmatism, prioritizing reconciliation, stability, and tangible welfare improvements over religious sentiment. This challenges clientelism theories by showing religious networks (like NU) mediating broader community interests rather than acting as mere transactional machines, expanding literature on political psychology in fragile states.

Finally, the most profound novelty is the development of Moderated Identity Politics. This theoretical contribution integrates local contextual factors—such as the influence of specific religious networks (NU), conflict trauma, and regional economic disparities—into the analysis of identity politics. By demonstrating how these localized dynamics reduce religious polarization and foster electoral pragmatism, the study moves beyond universalizing theories, providing a more accurate model for understanding identity, governance, and democratic participation in diverse, post-conflict regions.

CONCLUSION

The 2024 North Maluku gubernatorial election fundamentally reshaped our understanding of electoral dynamics in Muslim-majority regions. The victory of the Sherly-Sarbin ticket defied conventional Religious Voting Behavior theories, demonstrating that pragmatic considerations can decisively outweigh religious identity. This outcome was shaped by three key dynamics. First, the alliance’s Hybrid Representation—a Christian candidate paired with a prominent figure from Nahdlatul Ulama (NU)—effectively bridged communal divides. Second, the prevalence of Local Patronage Politics, where tangible promises of development and established bureaucratic networks eclipsed abstract religious appeals, was crucial. Finally, Post-Conflict Electoral Rationality led voters, scarred by past conflict, to prioritize stability over ideological purity.

Crucially, this election introduces “Moderated Identity Politics,” a groundbreaking framework in which religious organizations like NU actively depolarize elections by endorsing competence-based, cross-faith alliances while maintaining their Islamic legitimacy. These findings challenge reductionist views of Muslim voting behavior, proving that post-conflict electorates, given inclusive institutional conditions, prioritize tangible governance outcomes. North Maluku offers concrete operational insights for stakeholders in similar post-conflict environments. For election commissions, it highlights the need for conflict-sensitive ballot designs. Political parties can adopt a “competence-plus-credibility” model, strategically pairing minority technocrats with majority-cultural figures. Civil society organizations and religious bodies like NU should institutionalize their mediation roles by establishing pre-election power-sharing covenants and creating “Moderation Scorecards” for candidates’ reconciliation commitments. These interventions transform North Maluku’s

experience into a replicable template, demonstrating that religious identity can be strategically harnessed through institutional innovations that reward depolarizing electoral behavior while addressing voters' material concerns.

While valuable, the applicability of the North Maluku case requires careful consideration. Its success relies on specific conditions, such as the presence of a dominant, moderate Islamic organization like NU and the absence of zero-sum economic competition. These findings suggest that global theories of identity politics must account for regional variations in institutional capacity and historical memory.

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