

## Constructing Political Image in a Mediatized Local Election: Symbolic Strategies of the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) in West Java's 2018 Gubernatorial Campaign

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### ABSTRACT

The construction of political image by the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) during the 2018 Gubernatorial Election in West Java, Indonesia, is explored in this work, using a case study method. Regarding social construction theory by Berger and Luckmann and mediatized politics, the present research projects how PKS employed symbolic, narrative, and visual strategies to attract and shape the public's discourse and electoral appeal. Based on the data available across materials used in campaigns, media content, in-depth interviews, and field observations, the study differentiates three layers of image construction: a symbolic expression of religious and cultural affiliation, a narrative arrangement of morality and public office, and a tactical visual portrayal of digital and face-to-face campaigns. The analysis shows how PKS created a double image of religiosity and nationalism by combining a military person with an Islamic cleric while imposing local Sundanese symbols. Although the campaign connected well with those from the religious and conservative persuasion, it had problems reaching out to urban and non-ideology-oriented voters. The results show that political image construction is not just a tactical concern, but is socially constructed within local cultural values and mediated communication. This research participates in a larger debate about Islamic political branding, localized electoral strategy, and the mechanisms of identity representation in modern Indonesian democracy.

**Keywords:** Political Image Construction, Mediatized Politics, Islamic Political Parties, Local Elections, Symbolic Communication, PKS (Prosperous Justice Party), West Java Gubernatorial Election 2018

### INTRODUCTION

During the last two decades, Indonesia's regional head elections (Pilkada) have dramatically changed as part of a post-reform democratic consolidation. The implementation of direct elections in 2005 marked a trend of political decentralisation and an increase in the number of people voting for local leaders. This democratization process is an excellent break from centralized control towards a relatively more participatory distribution, and local political players have been increasingly significant in the national power setup (Booth, 2014).

Given that electoral competitions become tougher as time goes by, political communication tactics come into play to make a difference between the candidates and the political parties. Political communication, in this context, is not only about disseminating messages but also meaning-making and construction as well as the perception of

political actors. One important ingredient to these strategies is political image building, which systematically and symbolically creates a perception of a candidate or party's identity, talents, and character (Nimmo, 2000).

It is no longer possible to ignore political image-building as a cosmetic exercise. Now, it is a constituent in campaign management, ranging from voter segmentation, campaign narratives, visual symbolism, and traditional and digital media. Within a democracy based on personalized politics and media-driven dynamics, image has become an important mechanism to create legitimacy, gain voter support, and construct a political identity that reaps favour in the public sphere (Strömbäck, 2008).

This context is critical in the dynamics of the Pilkada in West Java – one of Indonesia's most densely populated provinces, famous for its demographic diversity and marked religiousness level. The sociocultural nature of West Java means it is a crucial battleground for political parties, particularly those with Islamic ideological ancestry, such as the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS). PKS witnessed a critical threat to its electoral relevance against an increasingly down-to-earth and image-oriented electoral struggle (Putra et al., 2020).

Since PKS is a party based on a religious movement, it is associated with the ideological program based on morality, integrity, and public service. However, in the reality of the electoral battle, such a platform is not always enough to achieve victory in an exceedingly competitive zone (Van Elk & Regal, 2023). Consequently, the party had to change strategically by rebuilding its political image to become more contextual and appealing to the electorate of West Java's populace.

The reconstruction of PKS's political image during the 2018 election can be examined via several political communication approaches. First, they used a personal narrative for their gubernatorial candidate, Ahmad Syaikh, a religiously moderate figure, who sought to pursue a particular image to bridge ideological identity with more generalized electability. Secondly, adopting a digital campaign strategy that benefits from social media immensely indicates a change from structural mobilization into individualized persuasion. Using its visual content, brief videos, and political memes, PKS attempted to appeal to younger, generally apolitical and digitally minded voters (Ndlela, 2020).

Third, using religious symbols in political campaigns can no longer be done openly, but in a package form with universal values such as honesty, compassion, and professionalism (Harun et al., 2023). This approach adapts to political pragmatism's needs whereby ideological symbols must be packaged more inclusively and communicatively to prevent them from being locked in too insular voter segmentation.

Nevertheless, the success of political image-building strategies depends not only on communication techniques but also on the socio-political setting and the historical perception of the party. In the case of PKS, the good image of a clean and militant party built since the early 2000s is starting to lose traction in the face of multiple internal issues and changes in public image (Makki & Akash, 2022). Hence, a harmony between the narrative, symbols, and actual practices emerges as a key to the credibility of the constructed image.

It should be noted that Pilkada dynamics in Indonesia and, particularly, in strategic regions such as West Java are a political laboratory for the interaction of identity, strategy, and local power structures (Rayya Bethy et al., 2023). Political image-building strategies investigated by parties such as PKS reveal how ideological actors can navigate a more pragmatic, mediatized, and perception-oriented political environment (Mardhiah et al., 2022).

It continues previous findings regarding symbolism and narrative in electoral political communication, proving that the political identity remains unchanged but is permanently negotiated within altered socio-political grounds. Therefore, the analysis of political image-building is pertinent in explaining success or lack of it in elections and in narrating the forms that local democracy takes beyond the superstructure of democratization (Bertoncin et al., 2023).

Despite its reputation as a political association that defends ideological identity based on Islamic values, scholarly works on how the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) creates its political image within the local electoral struggles are meager. Past research has been more concerned with the personal image construction of applicants than the institutional aspect of political communication strategies of the party (Syam, 2022).

In the world of 2018 West Java Pilkada, PKS had to fight in a dynamic political battlefield where voter segmentation was complex, which required image-building tactics that not only capture the ideology of the party but also one that can be adjusted to the dynamics of local public perception (Maulana & Djuyandi, 2023).

The key issue under investigation in this study is how PKS constructs and projects its political image using symbols, narratives, and media in the Pilkada campaign (Mensah et al., 2023). This entails questions about how the political image is strategically drawn, to what extent this image constitutes the party's identity, and how it works in shaping the domain of the electoral behavior of West Java voters.

This research attempts to conduct an in-depth evaluation of the political image-building strategies used by the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) in the West Java gubernatorial campaign 2018. In particular, it attempts to select and examine what symbolic, narrative, and visual aspects were employed by PKS in cultivating the party's institutional image in the context of an intensifying media-based and personalized electoral contest. Through a case study approach, this research also wants to understand how the image construction is set within West Java's

socio-political terrain and how these image-building strategies indicate the party's attempts to bridge its ideological nature with pragmatic electoral requirements.

Therefore, this study is expected to aid political communication scholarship, specifically, to understand the rhythms of Islamic political party image-crafting based on local electoral struggles in Indonesia. Scholarship is, largely, unidirectional, remaining candidate-based, highlighting such points as individualization, popularity, and personal communication techniques. This approach tends to ignore the institutional role of the political parties as major actors of political imagery formation, especially in cases of ideologically driven political parties such as the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) (Nevskaya, 2022).

Furthermore, much of the existing literature remains focused on the dynamics of the major national parties, to the exclusion of and with minimal focus upon the Islamic parties, within the context of contemporary political communication. At the same time, research examining the usage of symbolic elements, ideological narratives, and media strategies by political parties during Pilkada, particularly in the areas where the socio-religious forces are strong, such as West Java, is still very scarce. Therefore, it is crucial to find out how ideologically based parties like PKS prepare communication strategies applicable locally and within sociocultural attributes of the electorate (Miles, 2023).

Role of political parties in institutions: A more thorough analysis of how party communication strategies can influence public political participation in Pilkada. On the strength of such an assumption, this current investigation is meant to critically investigate the political communication adopted by PKS and its impact on voter engagement within West Java. The overriding goal is to determine how PKS utilizes various political communication, symbolic and narrative, using visuals to bolster the democratic system's popular participation during the election. A qualitative perspective to this research studies the effectiveness of such strategies to carry political awareness, and why the ideological symbols and value-based stories had a part in changing the party's image among the populace (M. M. Rahmawati & Munir, 2022).

In the framework of the recent scholarly development, likely directions of political image-building research, specifically about PKS's campaign during the 2018 West Java gubernatorial campaign, are to be specified by several new directions. A subdiscipline of political marketing, political branding is predicted to evolve to bring consumer branding methods to the political sphere. This approach enormously enriches our knowledge of the image construction process and its contribution to electoral behavior.

Technological transformation has also led to the redrawing of the political campaign grounds. E-electioneering practice has undoubtedly revolutionized long-standing campaign processes with this medium's interactive and participatory nature, which was previously effective in increasing electorate involvement and mobilization, growing use of social media apps like Instagram can serve as evidence of the key function of digital media when it defines political dialogue and prescribes the preferences of the voters (Subekti et al., 2025).

Moreover, lately, literature has indicated a transformation of perspective from the long term to further exploring the short, volatile aspects of political campaigns, which are usually under-explored (Bowler & Farrell, 1992). Future trends also require including global perspectives and ethics in qualitative research to help capture the complexity of social identity and power sets during modern political campaigning.

Conversely, the pragmatic dynamics in political coalition building have been developing as a growing dimension in research on electoral politics. PKS's coalition with other parties highlights the increasing tendency for short-term electoral winnings, contrary to ideological commitments, straight-tuning campaign orientation, and future political research trends. Taken together, these developments presage the future direction of political image studies: digital innovation, adaptive communication strategies, and multidimensional recognition of the patterns of public political engagement (Eguiluz et al., 2019).

Finally, scholarly interest in the connections between political party image formation and the public's perception of Islamic parties locally is not particularly rich. In the ever-tightening electoral democracy, an elaborate knowledge of how Islamic parties such as PKS create and convey their political image is required. The observation of the absence of studies integrating discourse analysis with the mediatization of politics theory in local campaign contexts is a critical theoretical void. This research attempts to fill that gap by providing more contextual and integrative knowledge of political image-building strategies of Islamic parties within regional electoral competition.

This study explores a new contribution to the body of political communication and Islamic political party studies in Indonesia in the topicalised analysis of institutional political image construction, rather than simply the individual candidate branding. Its chief novelty is considering the image-building tactics the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) applied as an ideological political form in the local electoral battle of the 2018 West Java gubernatorial election (Rofhani & Fuad, 2021). Using a case study approach and Berger's theory of the social construction of reality, this research undertakes a strategic mapping of how the party deals with the management of symbols, narratives, and media apparatuses to build an image that is adaptive to the voter's socio-political context.

The academic motivation for this work is to fill the gap between the electoral political communication research and the study of Islamic parties' functions in local democratic spaces. By drawing attention to the dynamics of the

image-building endeavor of PKS in a complex religio-electoral context, this study enriches the theoretical perspective on image-making in institutions. It provides empirical contributions to understanding ideologically-oriented party communication initiatives in digital times (Kissas, 2018). Consequently, besides the scientific community, this research has practical applications in designing political party communication strategies in Indonesia's electoral democracy.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses an interpretive orientation as it is a qualitative approach. This approach was motivated by exploring and making sense of the construction of meaning owned by the political image-building strategy of the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) in the 2018 West Java regional election (Pilkada). It allows the researcher to analyse the party's symbols, narratives, and communication strategies to construct its political image under the scramble of electoral competition (Egea-Medrano et al., 2021).

The approach is an inherent case study. This case study, therefore, is focused explicitly on PKS, which is central and plays a vital role in configuring its institutional image through electoral campaigns. This approach allows for a contextual analysis of political communication strategies and the sociocultural forces exerted on the public's perceptions of the party (Wagner & Meyer, 2023). The research setting extends to West Java province, specifically regions PKS targeted during the 2018 Pilkada campaign. The strategic electoral base, characterized by a large population and high religiosity, makes West Java highly relevant to the issue of Islamic party campaigns (Rayya Bethy et al., 2023).

Data was collected by interviewing PKS campaign teams, internal party figures, political consultants, and political observers in in-depth interviews. Other data was obtained from observations of both mass media and social media campaign materials. Secondary data incorporated official documents of the party, election reports, articles written by the media, academic materials, and references to political communication, image-building, and Islamic party studies. Data were collected using three primary techniques. (1) semi-structured interviews; (2) non-participant observation of visual and digital campaign content; and (3) document analysis of archives, news, and official publications related to PKS campaign activities (Munyiri et al., 2022).

Data analysis, undertaken through a case study approach and the theory of social construction, reveals that PKS's image in the 2018 West Java Pilkada was built in symbols, religious narrative, and local cultural aspects, systematically and strategically constructed. Filtering information applicable to the subject focus was used to reduce the data. This process entailed identification, initial coding, and group placement depending on political image dimensions, including religious symbolism, electoral narratives, and communication strategies (Loken, 2021).

The reduced information was then classified into important analytical themes, including the ideological identity of the party, representation of public morality, and visualization strategies in the campaign. Interpretation was conducted by combining field findings with political communication theory and literature on the mediatization of politics. Synthesising results of observation, interview, and document analysis reached conclusions. Source triangulation, respondent validation by key informants, and peer discussions were used to minimize interpretative bias during the verification.

Validity was achieved through method triangulation, data triangulation, and primary and secondary data verification. Reliability was ensured by systematically recording the research procedure, the systematic use of the interview guides, and an audit trail of the whole analytical process. This research is limited in terms of time focus since it concentrates on the 2018 Pilkada and one political party. Findings are generalized to only similar environments, parties based on ideology in an electoral setting in local contexts.

This research is being undertaken based on academic ethical principles. All the participants consented at an informed level after providing a detailed account of the aims and procedures of the study. Respondent identities were preserved, and the data were for scholarly purposes only. The procedure started with a literature review and the creation of the research design, followed by data collection through interviews, observation, and documentation (Ransome, 2023). This was followed by data transcription, thematic reduction analysis, and conclusion drawing. The research process was characterized by verifying and preparing the final report (Elliott et al., 2023).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Political Image-Building Strategy of PKS in the 2018 West Java Gubernatorial Election Campaign

To gain the 2018 West Java gubernatorial election, the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) adopted plenty of political image-building strategies as a social engineering tactic aiming to shape public perceptions in their

nominated candidate pair, Sudrajat-Syaikhu. This image-building process did not come up in the blue as they say. Instead, it was social interaction, political communication, and symbolization that were the product of the local cultural and political context of West Java. In other words, the image strategy of PKS can be regarded as a kind of politicised reality construction, which the party was supposed to show to its electorate (Wang, M.-H., Chang, W.-Y., Kuo, K.-H., & Tsai, 2022).

Inspired by one of Berger and Luckmann's theories, social reality is established in three phases: externalization (construction of meaning through people or groups), objectivation (the social recognition of that meaning), and internalization (meaning appropriation by individuals as an element of their reality). Inside this framework, PKS's move could be seen as symbolic and narrative externalization, which produces a positive platform image both for the candidate pair and the overall party (Yin, 2022).

PKS tactically created a candidate pair from different geographic areas, the Priangan area (Sudrajat) and the Pantura region (Ahmad Syaikhu) – to maximize electoral spread. This was a mindful activity in the objectification of social identity. The West Java voters have a high level of local identification. Therefore, the representation of these two major regions went some way to creating a sense of inclusivity and equal regional distribution of political power (Zulfikar Rakita Dewa et al., 2023).

Using a case study approach, we observe that this strategy became a way to express "togetherness in diversity," which became internalized by the voters as a primary value of the candidate pair. This geographic image building also showed PKS' consciousness of the symbolism of geography in electoral struggles. PKS also used more than 130 local and provincial legislators as political image builders (Farkas & Bene, 2021). Aside from their administrative functions, these legislators operated as symbolic extensions of the party, spreading narratives, values, and the vision-mission of the gubernatorial candidates. This type of externalization supported the political reality that PKS wanted to create.

Having held political workshops strategically in different regions also became an objective practice. These forums created a communal narrative, developed a communication system, and stabilized the structure that supported the candidates' image. PKS also consulted people from outside to prepare responses to public perceptions objectively. This is a part of reflexivity in social construction, and political actors take an external stance before establishing internal tactics.

In the last 7 days leading to elections, PKS opened a "media blitz" in social media, intended as a deliberate effort to rapidly and massively influence the media at once. In such a manner, social media became the symbolic field for political image-building in which narratives, visuals, and endorsements were created, spread, and embedded into the popular consciousness, particularly the millennial public, the main target of PKS.

PKS not only used social media but also implemented face-to-face engagement. In Berger and Luckmann's theory, social reality informed by face-to-face interaction is the most powerful because such interaction seems more authentic and genuine. Thus, the mixture of social media and interpersonal communication is committed to strengthening the truthfulness of the created political narrative (Krzyżanowski & Tucker, 2018).

Persuasive Communication and Leader Representation, PKS used political communication from interpersonal persuasion. Its cadres were actively distributing brochures, directly communicating with citizens, and establishing private relationships with voters. This approach is a kind of direct internalization, a way to engage emotionally and rationally with voters with the party and its candidates (Ueng, 2021).

Social construction theory would include leaders and public figures as important symbolic representatives of the values and meaning of a party. Military past of Sudrajat and reputation of the religious figure of Syaikhu created the dual symbols of security and morality, two integral parts of social imagination by West Java's populace (Truna & Zakaria, 2022).

Endorsement Strategy and the Symbolism of "Ganti Presiden", The Sudrajat-Syaikhu campaign was also associated with the national campaign "Ganti Presiden 2019" (Change the President 2019), and the ways that local stories were combined with national questions in the image-making strategies (Spalluto et al., 2022). This designed a dual layer of meaning – casting a vote for Sudrajat-Syaikhu was not merely voting for the governor election but allowing oneself to become part of a national political movement. This is an actual representation of complex, multi-level symbolic externalization.

The backing of the candidate pair in the form of the acronym "Asyik" (composite of the names) is another example of a symbolic approach aimed at the generation of collective memory and political branding.

**Figure 1:** T-shirt campaign #2018AsyikMenang #2019GantiPresiden

Image Caption: Campaign clips of the "Asyik" pair on the second public debate of the West Java gubernatorial election at the Hall of the University of Indonesia, Depok



Source: (Tempo.com, 2018)

The campaign image with a t-shirt printed with the hashtags #2018AsyikMenang#2019GantiPres ("AsyikWins2018, Change the President 2019") shows the cunning political image construction of PKS. Such imagery, in turn, is one of the components of the externalization process, when a party brings political messages and values out into the public (Awad et al., 2022). Using a simple visual, the t-shirt highlights the local West Java gubernatorial campaign and combines it with a nationwide political agenda for presidential change.

The time when this t-shirt was seen on the air while a person was having a live debate with others in an official public forum only drives home the fact even further that this symbol was not accidental but an intentional political statement. This is the stage of objectivation where symbols (such as the t-shirt and the messages imprinted on the same) get perceived and interpreted by the populace as carriers of political stance (De Duve, 2023). The t-shirt, therefore, went beyond its usual capacity as clothing to become an expression of ideology, a fact that also symbolized being part of a larger national opposition effort on the part of the "Asyik" candidate pair.

The next stage is internalization, whereby the public starts accepting this symbol as part of their political consciousness. Wearing or sharing the image allows people to show political orientation and a sense of belonging to a group (Spencer, 2022). The t-shirt becomes the channel that connects common values on the part of local voters and the supporters of national political change.

From the semiotic point of view, the symbol works on two levels. Denotational (in the form of a campaign t-shirt) and connotational (a position of promoting regime change). This means that with the visual message, it is not just the information passed but also political perception and emotion constructed. The campaign reveals how a single symbol can be used to build a new social reality with the help of local and national politics through powerful symbolic messages. Therefore, in modern politics, symbols are not just utilities of the campaign, but primary tools in meaning creation and public consciousness formation (Egea-Medrano et al., 2021).

Party Image and Public Perception, due to national-level issues like corruption scandals involving some of its political elites, PKS encounters challenges to its public image. Consequently, during the West Java gubernatorial race, its image-building strategy was also geared at restoring and establishing stability in the public perception. PKS tried to present an image of professionalism, religious integrity, and political cleanliness through its candidates and programmatic mentality.

Nevertheless, others believe that such building of images in the sphere of the gubernatorial election does not always correspond to reality. Critics argue that PKS's work to build a professional and clean image might be seen as a manipulative move to hide past failures or controversies. The programmatic platform of the party is not always complemented with routine implementation, which casts doubts among the public (Torre et al., 2022). Besides, over-emphasis on image can sometimes distract citizens' attention from critical issues pertinent to voters.

Internalization is not a synchronous process but occurs repetitively from the social experience. Therefore, PKS's attempt to maintain constant communication through local personalities, party structures, and digital media is a part of such long-term practice. Regarding the 2018 West Java Pilkada case study, PKS's image-building strategy

is explicable due to purposefully complex and multilayered social construction efforts. This strategy involves a geographic, symbolic, communicative, and emotional thrust to create a political reality that is effective and acceptable to voters.

From the viewpoint of Berger and Luckmann, these approaches are not practical tricks but purposeful attempts to create a new socio-political reality that the citizens of West Java are to embrace. It is not only the political power that structures the outcomes of the elections, but the political party can also create the social reality through symbols, narratives, and strategically oriented social interactions (Kravchenko et al., 2020).

### **This Research Aims to Discuss Identifying Symbolic, Narrative, And Visual Elements in Political Image-Building in the 2018 West Java Gubernatorial Election Campaign.**

Representation Politics in the Context of Social Reality, in the Mediatized Era, Image Building in Politics is no longer a Communication Strategy; it has even become an active process in creating the reality of politics itself (Alfani et al., 2023). In the circle of the 2018 West Java gubernatorial election, the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS), via its candidate pair Sudrajat–Syaiikh (Asyik), created a political reality using a variety of symbolic, narrative, and visual devices infused with Islamic values and public ethics. This way of thinking supports Berger and Luckmann's Social Construction of Reality model, in which the authors write that the social reality is intersubjectively formed through the processes of externalization (creation of meaning), objectivation (recognition of meaning), and internalization (adoption of meaning by society). Therefore, political image-building does not only amount to an act of manipulation, but a process of meaning production, recognizable and palatable to the public, in this case, the West Javanese voters, who are religiously, communally, and personalistically oriented political cultures (Putra et al., 2020).

Symbolic Externalization: Color, Slogans, and Religious Markers, though this was a conscious strategy for using potent visual symbols, PKS's image strategy in the West Java gubernatorial election. White uniformed the candidates and the campaign material like banners, billboards, t-shirts, and social media content. All over the Islamic culture, white symbolizes purity, sincerity, and moral righteousness. According to the social construction theory, externalization is when such internal meanings are externalized in terms of social symbolization (Pinich, 2022).

Such slogans as "Clean, Caring, Professional" and "Asyik Wins, The People Rejoice" reinforced this symbol. As per the internal documents of PKS West Java, these slogans were intentionally designed to create a story that is not religious but also of a populist nature. It aimed to make moral messaging free from ideological specificity and make it relevant to urban voters who are more pragmatic.

There was also symbolic projection by looking at the candidates' body language. In different visual media, they are depicted as being close to the people, having a handshake, being seated cross-legged, and addressing religious forums (Cheng, 2023). These gestures were the expressions of values in a local cultural context known to West Javanese society.

Three key problems were addressed by the narrative that PKS and the Asyik pair came up with. The candidates' piety, the party's moral regard, and dedication towards public service. These topics were directly put across the digital and print campaign media and constantly repeated by party spokespersons and the candidates themselves (Ivanova, 2023).

For example, internal party documents show Syaiikh as a very Islamic boarding school (pesantren), with an attached man performing intensely religious tasks and with a sober view of his personality. At the same time, Sudrajat is represented as a nationalist and a military man of integrity and decision. According to Berger and Luckmann's perspective, this is an objectivation process, where the symbolic elements assume social recognition in public places by consistent use and repetition.

These facts were confirmed by looking at the field-level data: PKS cadres were dispersing testimonials and brochures, carrying out social activities such as blood donations, providing free medical services, and conducting religious study sessions (pengajian). Such activities were practical and served as vehicles for supporting the claim of dedication, active work, and earnest service to the people (Zotti et al., 2023).

**Figure 2:** PDM PKS West Java Gubernatorial Sudrajat Visting Pesantren (Islamic Boarding School)

*Caption: Visitation of Sudrajat, a candidate for the West Java gubernatorial race, to Islamic Boarding School (Pondok Pesantren) Miftabul Huda, Manonjaya, Tasikmalaya Regency, West Java, Feb 25, 2018, Sunday.*  
 (Source: Bustomi; Antara, 2018)

Social construction theory in public relations points out that social reality is not objective and immutable, but constructed and defined based on communication, interactions, and exchange of meaning between individuals and groups (Mireanu, 2022). In this regard, any kind of communication, particularly communication in the political sphere, has enormous potential to influence public opinion and develop political identity. The examination of Sudrajat's visit to an Islamic boarding school (pesantren) through the prism of social constructionism theory shows numerous strategic properties hidden within this relational and symbolic political campaign activity (Özoral, 2023).

First, a visit can be said to reflect the attempt to produce the political meaning. By going to a religious educational establishment, Sudrajat, PKS's gubernatorial candidate, sent signals about a narrative in which he is a religious figure respecting the Islamic tradition and shares a cultural value with the local society. This move put together personal image and sent political identity propaganda that would take little to embrace by religious voter groups (Azizah, 2023).

The second purpose of the visit was to shape public opinion. Social construction theory implies that reality is seen in narratives and symbols, exchanged in interaction. Suppose such visits are covered positively in the media. In that case, people are more likely to view Sudrajat as a humble and people-oriented leader who responds to religious communities' needs. Third, and having a direct involvement with the public during the visit, a space for sharing ideas and aspirations was provided. This interaction can explain public issues and help voters evaluate how the candidate can respond (Surya et al., 2023), giving more credence to Sudrajat as a flexible and responsive leader.

Finally, since the values of religiousness are also deep-rooted in Indonesia, visiting a pesantren is a highly relevant and efficient communication strategy. This activity indicates understanding of the local social structures and cultural validation of Sudrajat's political image. According to the social construction theory, this visit did not mark a purely ceremonial event. However, it was a relational move to construct a political meaning, enlarge public sphere support, and increase public engagement capacity in the election campaign (Butowski et al., 2021).

Outside the pesantren visit, the narrative was informed with grassroots efforts: PKS cadres circulated testimonials, brochures, and more community services such as blood drives, free medical attention, and Islamic studies (pengajian). Such initiatives had a practical value and were used to reinforce the myth of commitment, practical work, and honesty in serving the people.

Symbols integrated into social action work as the visualizations of politics became vital instruments joining PKS's image-building strategy (Müller, 2023). Photographs and videos of the candidate hardly accentuated luxury or elite status; instead, they frequently had episodes of solidarity, empathy, and concrete participation in the community. The candidate is seen assisting flood victims, talking in coffee stalls, or leading prayers in local religious meet-ups (majelis taklim).

Under the social construction, these pictorial presentations are important in forming impressions of authenticity and emotional closeness. These pictures are not just a supplement to the narrative; they objectify the political reality in its more tangible form, politics as service, not domination. Through social media, such visual parts are reproduced and distributed in different forms: daily photos, short videos, infographics of achievements, and testimonials of residents. These images are not just a description of facts; they are tools of meaning-making that stand as a connecting link between the formed self-image and public recognition (Jiménez-Martínez, 2023).

This is the third and final stage in the social construction theory of Berger and Luckmann, when previously objectified symbols, narratives, and visuals are internalized by the society and become known as reality (Alvarez & Ruiz-Tagle, 2024). In the case of the PKS campaign in West Java, this could be observed in the strong welcome of the "asyik" pair that can be seen very clearly in religious places like Depoly, Tasikmalaya, and Garut.

The constituency that is the traditional and santri-based voter base responded positively to the image-building campaigns, as such efforts supported their values. From there on, symbols are identity, and narratives become political decisions. That is, the voters do not simply vote for a candidate's promises, but to a degree of value alignment: internalizing ideology through social identification. Many voters rely on appealing promises at the expense of ideological continuity. Others rely more on immediate and concrete rewards or quick-change rhetoric than on those lasting contemplations on shared values. Social identification can sometimes be overwhelmed by the emotional or pragmatic claims attached to the political campaigns. In several circumstances, the voters get disenchanted with specific ideologies and choose based on personal interest or circumstances (Pauls et al., 2015).

However, internal documents state that successful internalization tends to be segmented. For the younger voters who are located in urban settings, this process is less effective. They tend to be more sceptical of symbolism and demand rational pointers like track record, tangible programs, and candidate's performance in debates (Benevento, 2024).

Although PKS uses powerful symbolic elements and narratives, there are threats when purposeful actions do not follow symbolic image building. Berger and Luckmann state that the reality that is socially constructed can fall apart without constantly being legitimized. If the created image differs from the actual on-the-ground feeling internalization, or even worse, delegitimization may occur. In this respect, the credibility of the party and its candidate can be the determining factor. The correspondence between narrative and real political behavior determines whether the image is sustainable or just a temporary campaign show consumed.

The political image-building strategy used by PKS during the 2018 West Java gubernatorial election presented the practical combination of symbolic, narrative, and visual aspects with Islamic values and public service. From Berger and Luckmann's social construction theory, we understand how these symbols came to be externalized, objectified, and internalized by specific social segments as political reality (Shtanko & Grashchenkov, 2023). The effectiveness of that image-building strategy was situational and segmented, dependent on the correspondence between the constructed political symbols and value structures of those communities that the strategy was supposed to influence. This campaign confirms that political image building must emanate from congruence in culture, consistency with morality, and awareness of the present social trends.

### **Effectiveness of PKS's Image-Building Strategy in the Political Culture of the 2018 West Java Gubernatorial Campaign.**

The effectiveness of the Prosperous Justice Party's (PKS) image-building strategy in the 2018 West Java gubernatorial election can be ascertained from how it communicated politically meaningful messages that reverberate with the local political culture of West Java. West Java, identified by intense religiosity and voter blocs driven by values, offered a strategic terrain for Islamic narratives being packaged in populist formats (Djuyandi et al., 2019). The morally and socially constructed image of PKS was met with a favourable response, especially within the religious middle-class voters and pesantren-based communities.

However, this effectiveness has its limits: the situation is especially critical in the attempt to win over the progressive urban voters and non-ideological youth who are more receptive to contemporary challenges, pragmatic qualities of the leadership, and personal performance of the politicians. Therefore, PKS's success in image building largely depended on how symbols and images were positioned in the milieu of West Java's heterogeneous political value system (Mensah et al., 2023). PKS needs to be more inclusive in expanding its base, especially regarding critical young voters, who are becoming more attuned to social and political issues.

Political image-building is instrumental in contemporary electoral democracy. It is not even a question of visual aesthetics or rhetorical froth, but the creation of representations of self and values in shapes that can be identified, accepted, and digested by the electorate. In the case of the 2018 West Java gubernatorial race, PKS established the image of the Sudrajat–Ahmad Syaikhu pair via symbolic, narrative, and emotional approaches in line with the cultural and political underpinnings of the region. PKS tried to make Sudrajat present himself as the real Sundanese character, stressing his parental background from Sumedang and Cianjur. Sudrajat has Sundanese genes, which can

even be seen on his face. Although he has studied in the United States, he is deep down Sundanese (Antaranews.com, 2018).

Exploring the social construction theory by Berger and Luckmann, the picture strategy under consideration can be described in three stages. Externalization (projection of meaning into the public sphere), objectivation (subjective acceptance of that as reality in society), and internalization (insertion of that meaning within individual consciousness). PKS aimed at creating an electoral image that could incorporate religious symbolism, moral messages, and social proximity into a political fact that the West Javanese voters can embrace.

Inculcating the Islamic values-based party, PKS never stopped employing symbolic methods, but promoted the representatives of the "Asyik" candidate pair as religious, clean, and people-oriented leaders. Internal PKS West Java reports explain how specific visual attributes were used to bring internal values into the public social sphere (O'Cass, 2001). These attributes included white clothing, black peci (cap), and ethical slogans such as "Clean, Caring, Professional".

Candidates were also depicted in socially important actions with the help of images: helping the victims of a flood, participating in pengajian (religious gatherings), and giving sermons every Friday. These performances acted as a symbolic, religious, and socially grounded construct. Sudrajat, as well as Syaikh, being a military figure and an Islamic scholar, respectively, depicted a balance between strictness and tranquility, nationalism and religiosity, aimed to appeal to conservative Islamic voters and moderate nationalists (Rahmawati et al., 2019).

In the phase of objectivation, the outside symbols get projected, and they are primarily taken to be part of the public's meaning structure (Marková, 2012). This process was especially successful in religious communities and regions of strong pesantren culture, such as Tasikmalaya, Cianjur, Garut, and Depok. These regions are characterised by a normative-participatory political culture in which moral integrity, religious affiliation, and social proximity painstakingly dominate the voters' preference in selecting leaders.

PKS benefited from such structures by utilizing party cadres and majelis taklim networks to spread religious and moral-social stories. Campaign brochures, social media, and Friday sermons were ideological messaging moods. Sociologically, this objectivation was secured further due to the symbolic authority of religious leaders who had deep cultural legitimacy in West Java's Muslim communities (Seise, 2021).

There was also objectification through multi-level narrative coalescence from the digital campaigns to the local forums. Phrases like "trustworthy", "devoted", and "collective spirit" were used as symbolic language that was easily linked to the Islamic values and the local culture. Through this, PKS installed a solid and applicable image in the voters' minds that preserves the religious and social values. Internalization occurred when the electorates embraced such promoted values and images and integrated them into their political personalities (Tambunan & Pramono, 2023).

This approach, however, was greatly limited. Internalization, the process by which symbolic values and images are taken into the individual's political consciousness, did not achieve consistent results. The interviews with the officials of the PKS West Java showed that image-building was very successful in the religious middle-class and pesantren communities, while being weaker among the urban, progressive, and non-ideological youth voters. In this case study, internalization concerning the symbolic value within segments was limited by differences in constructing political reality in segments. Berger and Luckmann remind us that structures of consciousness are formed by varying social experiences. Therefore, religious symbols and moral tales do not necessarily translate into an electable vote in more rational voter groups (Baykov & Pavlov, 2022).

Symbolically, PKS's strategy provided emotional communication by projecting trust, honesty, and public service. However, looking at it from a semiotic perspective, political communication's success depends not only on the strength of the symbols but also on their interpretive context. Symbolic meanings can change and provide voters who are reluctant towards religion-based parties (Carmella, 2011).

Criticism occurs when visual image-building is viewed as an "empty branding" deprived of policies. Symbolic campaigns lacking in serious policy proposals tend to be disregarded as manipulative or irrelevant among the urban communities with high access to information. Religious symbols could cease to carry appeal, or even create the impulse of resentment, if considered too normative or narrow-minded. Adaptive context is a prime strength of PKS. Internal campaign documents say that they fine-tuned the narratives based on regions. Using the fundamentals of Islam in the conservative areas and being oriented to the public service, economic justice, and professional governance in the urban areas (Abadi & Hidayatulloh, 2022).

However, such adaptation will likely cause symbolic dissonance among the watchful voters when they encounter discrepancies between image and practice. This dissonance creates tension between the "constructed reality" and the "lived reality" in the social construction theory. Image-building can lack its constructive force if it is underscored by a lack of legitimacy, either through the use of local figures, actual programs, or truthful telling of it. Based on the analysis above, it may be concluded that the political image-building strategy that PKS applied in the West Java Gubernatorial election in 2018 was highly effective but segmentally. This strategy successfully

created and legitimized the political reality among the religious, communal, and normatively value-driven communities. However, it attracted progressive, rational, and non-ideological urban voters (Siregar et al., 2023).

The effectiveness of such a strategy is not only stipulated by the mere symbolic power, but also by the level of the contextualization and internalization of symbols and their substantiation through the concrete action. Image-building can boomerang when symbols fail to have substance or are considered not to be consistent. According to Berger and Luckmann, political reality is not objective but a social construct that must be supported by legitimacy and social experience; there must also be meaningful symbolism (Knoblauch & Wilke, 2016). A winning political image-building strategy is a strategy that not only appeals to emotion but also builds belief.

## CONCLUSION

This research has addressed how the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) strategically created its political image while participating in the 2018 West Java gubernatorial election, explicitly addressing the integration of symbolic, narrative, and visual materials in a mediatized electoral context. Using the theoretical foundations of social construction of reality developed by Berger and Luckmann, this research has shown that political image-making by PKS was a multilayered, intricate construction of meaning, cohesion, and electoral action amongst voters in West Java. Placing this process in the cultural and religious specificities of the region, the study reveals how localized identity politics and ideological branding intersect in modern democratic campaigns.

The findings expose that PKS used an extensive symbolic strategy, using religious imagery, cultural stories, and digital communication to double represent piety and nationalism. The building of the "Asyik" candidate pair (Sudrajat–Syaikh) was purposefully targeted at the various voter segments. Sudrajat represented military professionalism and Sundanese identity, while Syaikh represented religious integrity and leadership for the Islamic community. This pairing allowed PKS to narratively construct the campaign as rooted at the local level and morally aspirational simultaneously. Using pictorial representations such as white clothes, religious gatherings, social charity programs, and social media videos helped to emphasise further the notion of cleanliness, morality, populism, and proximity to the grassroots.

One of the most important contributions of this research is integrating political communication, symbolic politics, and mediatization theory in the empirical context of a subnational Islamic party campaign. By shifting away from the individual-centric political candidates analysis, this study brings forward the institutional image of the party and how the ideological brand was presented offline and digitally. This is especially relevant with the Indonesian setting, where party-based campaigning can easily be drowned in personalism and celebrity politics. Using this change in lens, the study contributes to understanding how Islamic parties such as PKS manoeuvre the normative self and the pragmatic necessities of electoral struggle.

Moreover, the study reports the segmented effectiveness of PKS's image construction. Although in resonating with the religious, conservative, and pesantren-based communities the campaign achieved success, especially in the rural and semi-urban areas, it did not perform as well among urban, secular, and youth voters who had paid more attention to rational programmatic claims and objective performance indexes. This reaffirms the need for voter segmentation in political brands and symbolic strategies that are contextually adaptive and multidimensional to allay wider groups of people.

Notwithstanding these findings, the study has various limitations that should be appreciated. Firstly, the given study is a case study grounded on one case only concerning the 2018 West Java gubernatorial election. Although the level of analysis facilitates significant contextual meaning and understanding, the findings cannot be easily extrapolated to other provinces and electoral situations in Indonesia. The process of political image making might differ in distinct regions with a notable demographic, religious, or political composition. Second, even though the study uses a wide range of data sources such as interviews, campaign materials, and social media content, it is weakened by the lack of voter survey data. Therefore, although the study can establish how PKS wanted to build its image, it cannot determine how the voters interpreted or internalized messages. Future research can use mixed methods where discourse analysis is coupled with audience research using surveys, triangulating the production of symbols with their reception.

Moreover, although the research is about the symbolic and communicative aspects of political campaigns, it places less emphasis on the role of the organizational capacity and the funding network and party machinery, which, too, affect the effectiveness of campaigns. Other research can examine the synergy between symbolic politics and material campaign structure to give a complete picture of election performance.

For further study, there are a variety of directions. First, it is possible that a comparative analysis of political images in Indonesia's very diverse electoral grounds would be an option. One can investigate how various Islamic or ideological parties elaborate political images. Such research may discuss whether the strategies of PKS in West Java are replicated, changed, or abandoned in other provinces and how cultural, religious, and media environments

influence these decisions. Second, subsequent investigation may consider the meaning of digital influencers, online micro-targeting, and algorithmic visibility in promoting or demolishing party image in Indonesia's increasingly mediatized political sphere. With the emergence of digital media as the primary medium of campaign communication, it is imperative to think about the message, the dissemination mechanisms, and the consequences.

Lastly, this study emphasizes the necessity to engage the symbolic political communication world with wider discussions of democratic legitimacy and citizen involvement. With political branding more and more central in electoral politics, academics must hold onto the exploration of the nexus involving image and substance, symbolism and accountability, and performance and perception. In the case of PKS, the campaign managed to maintain the ideological brand of the party and promote religious-moral identity among the party's loyalists. However, the narrow basis of its appeal to swing and unideological voters raises meaningful questions about the readiness of purely symbolic electoral strategy for the long haul in a fractured and cut-throat democracy.

To conclude, political image-building is not a mere expedient of a political campaign but rather a social and cultural endeavor in which parties attempt to outline their identities and appeal to electors. In cases such as Indonesia, where religion, identity, and media intersect in intricate ways, it is essential to understand this process to appreciate the developing nature of democratic politics.

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