

Overcoming Identity Politics through National Islam: The Relevance of Ahmad Syafii Maarif's Thought for Contemporary Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes Ahmad Syafii Maarif's thought on the relationship between Islam, the state, and nationhood and examines its relevance for addressing identity politics in contemporary Indonesia. This study is important because the mobilization of religious identities in the political arena has the potential to intensify social polarization and undermine national integration within a plural society. The study employs a qualitative approach using a library research method. The data consist of Ahmad Syafii Maarif's major works and relevant academic literature, which are analyzed through Hassan Hanafi's theory of *Al-Turath wa al-Tajdid* and Abdul Karim Soroush's theory of *Qabdh wa Bast*. The findings show that Ahmad Syafii Maarif rejects the concept of *ad-din wa ad-daulah* because religion and the state possess fundamentally different characteristics. Religion is normative and transcendent, whereas the state is historical, dynamic, and open to change. In his view, Islam should function as a source of public ethics that guides national life, while the principle of *shura* serves as a meeting point between Islamic values, democracy, and Indonesian nationalism. Based on this perspective, Ahmad Syafii Maarif develops the concept of National Islam (*Islam Kebangsaan*), which places pluralism, justice, and humanity at the center of collective life. This concept offers an alternative to exclusive and sectarian forms of identity politics. This study contributes to the literature by demonstrating that National Islam represents a synthesis between the reconstruction of Islamic tradition and a contextual understanding of religion that can serve as a normative framework for strengthening democracy and social cohesion in Indonesia.

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis relasi wahyu, tradisi, dan akal dalam Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis pemikiran Ahmad Syafii Maarif mengenai hubungan Islam, negara, dan kebangsaan serta menjelaskan relevansinya dalam mengatasi politik identitas di Indonesia kontemporer. Kajian ini penting dilakukan karena mobilisasi identitas keagamaan dalam

arena politik berpotensi memperkuat polarisasi sosial dan mengganggu integrasi kebangsaan dalam masyarakat yang plural. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan metode studi kepustakaan (*library research*). Data diperoleh dari karya-karya utama Ahmad Syafii Maarif dan berbagai literatur akademik yang relevan, kemudian dianalisis dengan memanfaatkan teori *Al-Turats wa al-Tajdid* Hassan Hanafi dan teori *Qabdh wa Bast* Abdul Karim Soroush. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Ahmad Syafii Maarif menolak konsep *ad-din wa ad-daulah* karena agama dan negara memiliki karakter yang berbeda. Agama bersifat normatif dan transenden, sedangkan negara bersifat historis, dinamis, dan terbuka terhadap perubahan. Dalam pandangannya, Islam harus berfungsi sebagai sumber etika publik yang membimbing kehidupan berbangsa, sementara prinsip syura menjadi titik temu antara nilai-nilai Islam, demokrasi, dan kebangsaan Indonesia. Dari perspektif tersebut, Ahmad Syafii Maarif mengembangkan konsep Islam Kebangsaan yang menempatkan pluralisme, keadilan, dan kemanusiaan sebagai fondasi kehidupan bersama. Konsep ini menawarkan alternatif terhadap politik identitas yang eksklusif dan sektarian. Penelitian ini berkontribusi dengan menunjukkan bahwa Islam Kebangsaan merupakan sintesis antara rekonstruksi tradisi Islam dan pemahaman kontekstual terhadap agama yang dapat digunakan sebagai kerangka normatif untuk memperkuat demokrasi dan kohesi sosial di Indonesia.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Identity politics has become one of the most prominent phenomena in the development of contemporary democracies (Fukuyama, 2018). In many cases, political actors use ethnic, religious, racial, and cultural identities as instruments of political mobilization to secure electoral support and strengthen political legitimacy (Heryanto, 2018; Mietzner, 2020). Identity politics originally emerged as a response to the marginalization experienced by particular groups within social and political structures (Gitlin, 2020). However, its development has often transformed identity politics into an instrument of exclusivism that divides society into categories of “us” and “them” (Maarif, 2010). This condition has the potential to weaken social cohesion because political orientations no longer rely on ideas, policy programs, or public interests, but rather on shared primordial identities that are particularistic in nature.

In the Indonesian context, identity politics frequently appears through the mobilization of religious sentiments (Hidayah et al., 2025). This phenomenon has intensified since the *Reformasi* era, when democratic spaces became more open and political competition became increasingly unrestricted. Several studies have demonstrated that religious identity serves as an effective instrument for generating political support while simultaneously delegitimizing political opponents (Febriansyah et al., 2024; Lestari, 2018; Nguitragool, 2020). Consequently, political contestation has often shifted from programmatic debates toward symbolic struggles that emphasize religious differences. This condition affects not only public political behavior but also threatens the values of tolerance, pluralism, and nationalism that constitute the foundation of Indonesia’s political life.

The 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election provides one of the clearest examples of the growing influence of religion-based identity politics. Political actors widely circulated interpretations of Qur’an 5:51 in public discourse to construct negative perceptions of Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok), despite his status as the incumbent governor with relatively high electability (Sari, 2016). This narrative

subsequently triggered large-scale mobilizations through the 212 Islamic Defending Action and the 505 Movement, which significantly influenced Jakarta's electoral dynamics (Mahadika & Sardini, 2019). Survey findings also indicated that religious identity played an important role in shaping voter preferences during this period. A post-election survey conducted by the Indonesian Survey Institute (*Lembaga Survei Indonesia* [LSI]) found that religious considerations exerted a substantial influence on political choices among voters (Sugiarto, 2021). These developments demonstrate that identity politics has evolved beyond a sporadic phenomenon and has become one of the major challenges to democratic consolidation in Indonesia.

This situation highlights the importance of exploring alternative intellectual frameworks capable of reconciling the relationship between religion, the state, and nationhood. One prominent figure who offers such a perspective is Ahmad Syafii Maarif. As an Indonesian Muslim intellectual, Ahmad Syafii Maarif consistently promoted an inclusive, humanistic, and nationally oriented interpretation of Islam. He rejected the use of religion as an exclusive instrument of political power while criticizing various forms of religious ideological manipulation that could divide society. In his view, Islam should function as a source of public ethics that guides social and political life without requiring the establishment of either a religious state or a narrow form of identity politics (Burhani, 2013).

Studies on Ahmad Syafii Maarif have developed along several major trajectories. First, a number of scholars have focused on the development of his Islamic thought and the intellectual influences that shaped his ideas. Burhani (2013) demonstrated how Fazlur Rahman's intellectual legacy influenced Ahmad Syafii Maarif's understanding of the relationship between Islam and modernity. Beck et al. (2018) examined Ahmad Syafii Maarif's intellectual journey and his contribution to the formation of Islamic and Indonesian identities. Similarly, Jubba et al. (2022) highlighted Ahmad Syafii Maarif's position as one of the most influential moderate Muslim thinkers in contemporary Indonesian Islam. While these studies successfully explain his intellectual background, they do not specifically connect his ideas to the growing phenomenon of identity politics within Indonesia's contemporary democratic landscape.

Second, several studies have examined Ahmad Syafii Maarif's thought in relation to Qur'anic interpretation, humanity, and national identity. Ridwan (2021) analyzed Ahmad Syafii Maarif's reflective-accommodative approach to understanding the Qur'an. Sofjan (2020) and Dewi (2021) explored the themes of Islam, humanity, and Indonesian identity that characterize his intellectual project. More recently, Haq (2025) demonstrated the relevance of Ahmad Syafii Maarif's concept of humanistic Islam in strengthening Indonesian identity during the post-Reformasi era. These studies successfully reveal the humanistic dimensions of his thought; however, they do not adequately explain how these ideas can address the growing influence of religion-based identity politics.

Third, several scholars have discussed Ahmad Syafii Maarif's contributions to Islamic education and the renewal of Islamic thought in Indonesia. Wikandono (2020) and Saputra et al. (2024) explained the influence of his ideas on the development of contemporary Islamic education in Indonesia. Their findings indicate that Ahmad Syafii Maarif was deeply concerned with fostering a democratic and civilized society. Nevertheless, these studies primarily focus on educational and intellectual reform and do not specifically connect his thought to the challenges posed by identity politics in contemporary Indonesian political life.

Based on this review of the literature, two major research gaps remain. First, previous studies have primarily examined Ahmad Syafii Maarif's thought in relation to Islam, humanity, education, and national identity, while research that specifically connects his ideas to the phenomenon of identity politics remains limited. Second, few studies have interpreted Ahmad Syafii Maarif's thought through Hassan Hanafi's (1980) theory of *Al-Turath wa al-Tajdid* and Abdul Karim Soroush's (1990) theory of *Qabdh wa Bast* to explain the relationship between religion, the state, and society in contemporary Indonesia. As a result, Ahmad Syafii Maarif's intellectual contribution as a conceptual alternative to identity politics has not yet received adequate scholarly attention.

Addressing these gaps, this study aims to analyze Ahmad Syafii Maarif's thought on the relationship between Islam, the state, and nationhood and to explain its relevance for addressing identity politics in contemporary Indonesia. Specifically, this study examines his ideas of National

Islam (*Islam Kebangsaan*), pluralism, and *shura* through the perspectives of *Al-Turath wa al-Tajdid* and *Qabdh wa Bast*.

This study argues that Ahmad Syafii Maarif offers a model of National Islam capable of addressing identity politics through a conceptual distinction between religion as a source of transcendent values and the state as a historical and dynamic institution. Within this framework, Islam does not function as an exclusive political identity but rather as a source of public ethics that guides democratic, pluralistic, and just social life. This argument expands existing interpretations of *Al-Turath wa al-Tajdid* and *Qabdh wa Bast* by demonstrating that the reinterpretation of Islamic tradition can produce a more inclusive form of religiosity that is compatible with Indonesia's plural national reality. Consequently, Ahmad Syafii Maarif's thought remains relevant not only as a project of Islamic reform but also as a conceptual framework for strengthening democracy and mitigating identity politics in contemporary Indonesian society.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

The unit of analysis focuses on Ahmad Syafii Maarif's thought, particularly his ideas concerning the relationship between Islam, the state, pluralism, and identity politics as articulated in his works on Islam and Indonesian nationhood. The study selects this focus because Ahmad Syafii Maarif is one of Indonesia's most influential Muslim intellectuals who consistently developed an inclusive, humanistic, and nationally oriented understanding of Islam.

This study employs a qualitative approach because it aims to understand and interpret the intellectual construction of a prominent thinker in depth rather than measure relationships among variables quantitatively. The research draws upon both primary and secondary sources. The primary data consist of Ahmad Syafii Maarif's major works, particularly *Politik Identitas dan Masa Depan Pluralisme Kita* (2010), *Islam dan Masalah Kenegaraan: Studi tentang Percaturan dalam Konstituante* (1985), *Islam dan Pancasila sebagai Dasar Negara* (2006), and *Islam dan Politik: Teori Belah Bambu Masa Demokrasi Terpimpin (1959-1965)* (1996). The secondary data consist of journal articles, academic books, previous studies, and other scholarly publications relevant to identity politics, pluralism, Islam, and the state in Indonesia.

The study collects data through library research. The researcher identifies, selects, and examines various sources that are relevant to the research focus. The data collection process systematically reviews primary and secondary sources that discuss Ahmad Syafii Maarif's thought, identity politics, pluralism, and the relationship between Islam and the state in the Indonesian context. The study analyzes the data using a critical-hermeneutic approach combined with content analysis. The analysis proceeds through three stages: data reduction, thematic categorization, and meaning interpretation. During the interpretation stage, the study examines Ahmad Syafii Maarif's thought within its socio-political context and relates it to the dynamics of contemporary Indonesian identity politics in order to identify its relevance and theoretical contribution.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A Brief Overview of Ahmad Syafii Maarif

Ahmad Syafii Maarif was one of Indonesia's most influential Muslim intellectuals in the development of Islamic thought, democracy, and nationalism. Born in West Sumatra in 1935, he became widely recognized as a modernist Muslim scholar who promoted an inclusive, humanistic, and nationally oriented understanding of Islam. His intellectual journey reached its peak when he earned a doctoral degree from the University of Chicago under the supervision of Fazlur Rahman. His dissertation examined the relationship between Islam and the state within the debates of Indonesia's Constituent Assembly (Burhani, 2013). His ideas appeared in numerous influential works, including *Islam dan Masalah Kenegaraan: Studi tentang Percaturan dalam Konstituante* (1985), *Islam dan Politik: Teori Belah Bambu Masa Demokrasi Terpimpin* (1996), *Islam dan Pancasila sebagai Dasar Negara* (2006), *Politik Identitas dan Masa Depan Pluralisme Kita* (2010), and *Islam & Politik: Upaya Membingkai Peradaban* (2018). Through these works, Ahmad Syafii Maarif consistently emphasized the importance of pluralism,

democracy, humanity, and National Islam (*Islam Kebangsaan*) as the foundations of political life within Indonesia's plural society (Beck, 2018; Sofjan, 2020).

Religion, the State, and Ahmad Syafii Maarif's Critique of the Concept of *Ad-Din wa Ad-Daulah*

Ahmad Syafii Maarif's political thought rests upon a clear distinction between religion as a source of transcendent values and the state as a historical institution created by human beings. This distinction constitutes the foundation of his critique of the concept of *ad-din wa ad-daulah*, which views Islam as both religion and state. For Ahmad Syafii Maarif, the question of the relationship between Islam and the state cannot be resolved by merging the two into a single formalistic entity. Instead, religion should function as a source of public ethics that guides political life (Maarif, 1985, pp. 155–160). This perspective emerged from his reading of Islamic political history, Indonesia's constitutional experience, and the normative principles contained in the Qur'an.

His rejection of the concept of *ad-din wa ad-daulah* stems from the argument that Islam does not provide a fixed and final model of the state. Through his examination of debates within the Constituent Assembly, Ahmad Syafii Maarif demonstrated that demands to establish Islam as the foundation of the state emerged primarily from political interpretations rather than from explicit mandates within Islamic teachings themselves (Maarif, 1985, pp. 167–172). According to him, neither the Qur'an, the Hadith, nor the Constitution of Medina provides a definitive formulation of an Islamic state that all Muslims must implement across time and place. Consequently, efforts to identify Islam with a particular form of state risk reducing the universality of religion to a merely temporal political instrument.

This position becomes even more apparent in his critique of the formalization of *sharia* within state institutions. Ahmad Syafii Maarif argued that the success of Islam does not depend on the extent to which religious symbols become institutionalized within political systems. Instead, success depends on the ability of Islamic values to promote justice, humanity, and social welfare within society (Maarif, 2006, pp. 134–138). Therefore, the relationship between Islam and the state should operate within a substantive rather than a formalistic framework. Islam provides moral orientation for public life, while the state functions as an instrument for governing collective life within a plural society. Within the Indonesian context, this position explains why Ahmad Syafii Maarif accepted Pancasila as the foundation of the state. He argued that Pancasila does not contradict Islam because it embodies universal values that align with the principles of justice, deliberation, and respect for human dignity (Maarif, 2006, pp. 201–207).

This argument originates from his understanding of the essential distinction between religion and the state. Ahmad Syafii Maarif maintained that religion possesses an immutable character because it derives from divine revelation, whereas the state possesses a mutable character because it is a historical product continuously shaped by changing circumstances of time and place (Maarif, 1996, pp. 195–196). Equating religion with the state means placing something transcendent and absolute within the realm of politics, which remains relative and dynamic. From this perspective, the state serves merely as a means of realizing the moral objectives taught by religion, and therefore the two cannot be treated as identical entities. Religion functions as a divine message, whereas the state functions as an instrument that changes according to societal needs and historical developments.

Ahmad Syafii Maarif's perspective closely resembles Abdul Karim Soroush's theory of *Qabdh wa Bast*. Soroush (1990) distinguishes religion as an immutable revealed truth from human understanding of religion, which remains historical and continually evolving. This distinction explains that various political concepts developed in the name of Islam are, in reality, products of human interpretation that remain open to criticism and change. Within this framework, the Islamic state is not an absolute theological doctrine but rather one political interpretation that emerged from a particular historical context. This perspective helps explain why Ahmad Syafii Maarif rejected claims that Islam requires a specific form of state while simultaneously emphasizing the importance of political *ijtihad* in formulating systems of governance that correspond to the needs of Indonesian society.

Based on this understanding, Ahmad Syafii Maarif developed a complementary relationship between religion and the state. The state is necessary to guarantee religious freedom, protect citizens'

rights, and create social order, while religion provides the moral foundation that prevents political life from becoming trapped in the pragmatism of power (Maarif, 2018, pp. 88–93). Consequently, he rejected the use of religion as an instrument for mobilizing identity politics that could threaten pluralism, democracy, and national integration. In his view, the primary task of religion is not to seize or preserve political power but to cultivate ethical consciousness that enables the creation of a just, inclusive, and civilized public sphere.

This perspective demonstrates that Ahmad Syafii Maarif viewed Islam not as a state ideology but as a source of public ethics that guides collective life. Islam does not provide a fixed model of the state; rather, it offers a set of moral values that can serve as the foundation for building a democratic and just political system. Accordingly, society determines the form of the state through a process of political *ijtihad* that takes into account historical context, social needs, and universal humanitarian principles, while religion continues to function as a source of moral inspiration that directs the goals of political life.

National Islam, Pluralism, and Humanity in Ahmad Syafii Maarif's Thought

If Ahmad Syafii Maarif's conception of the relationship between religion and the state rests upon a rejection of religious formalism, the substantive orientation of this perspective materializes through his idea of National Islam (*Islam Kebangsaan*), which places humanity, pluralism, and justice at the center of collective life. Ahmad Syafii Maarif argued that religious, ethnic, cultural, and social diversity constitutes a historical reality that cannot be eliminated from Indonesian society. Therefore, Islam should not function as an instrument of domination for any particular group; rather, it should serve as a moral force that nurtures and strengthens social cohesion within a plural society (Maarif, 2010, pp. 85–87).

This perspective emerged from his critique of identity politics, which treats differences in identity as the primary basis for political solidarity. Ahmad Syafii Maarif defined identity politics as the expression of group interests that arise from experiences of marginalization or domination within a socio-political system (Maarif, 2010, p. 4). Although identity politics may function as an instrument of resistance for marginalized groups under certain circumstances, its excessive use has the potential to generate social exclusivism that threatens national unity. Consequently, he argued that political movements built upon religious, ethnic, or group-based sentiments tend to promote anti-pluralist, anti-democratic, and anti-nationalist attitudes (Maarif, 2010, pp. 85–87).

His critique of identity politics did not originate from a rejection of religious identity itself. Instead, it stemmed from his conviction that Islam carries a humanitarian mission that transcends group boundaries. Ahmad Syafii Maarif viewed Islam as a religion that conveys universal messages of justice, brotherhood, freedom, and respect for human dignity. Therefore, the success of Islam should not be measured by the political dominance of Muslims but by its ability to embody universal humanitarian values within social life (Beck, 2018; Sofjan, 2020). This perspective explains why Ahmad Syafii Maarif consistently rejected various forms of religious exclusivism that portray other groups as threats to Islamic identity.

Within this framework, pluralism represents an ethical consequence of recognizing human diversity. Ahmad Syafii Maarif did not interpret pluralism as relativism that erases religious convictions. Rather, he understood it as a willingness to acknowledge the rights of other groups within the same public sphere (Haq, 2025). Every community has the right to maintain its beliefs, but no community possesses the legitimacy to impose those beliefs upon others through instruments of power or social pressure. According to Ahmad Syafii Maarif, this attitude constitutes a fundamental prerequisite for creating a healthy democratic life in a multicultural society such as Indonesia (Dewi, 2021, pp. 576–577).

His commitment to pluralism found its political expression in the concept of National Islam (*Islam Kebangsaan*). Ahmad Syafii Maarif argued that Indonesian nationalism does not contradict Islam because both aim to realize social justice and collective welfare. He did not understand nationalism as excessive glorification of the nation; instead, he viewed it as a collective awareness of living together within a political community founded upon equality and respect for diversity (Maarif, 2006, p. 132). Therefore, the relationship between Islam and nationhood is not antagonistic but mutually reinforcing.

Islam provides moral orientation, while nationhood offers the social and political space necessary for the realization of those values.

The normative foundation that enables the encounter between Islam and nationhood lies in the principle of *shura*. Ahmad Syafii Maarif regarded *shura* as a central political ideal in the Qur'an that emphasizes deliberation, participation, and respect for human equality (Maarif, 1996, pp. 193–194). This principle shares substantial similarities with democracy because both reject authoritarianism and place society at the center of decision-making processes. Consequently, Ahmad Syafii Maarif did not regard democracy as an exclusively Western product that conflicts with Islam. Instead, he viewed democracy as a political instrument through which the values of justice, equality, and deliberation can be realized in national life.

This perspective demonstrates that Ahmad Syafii Maarif did not approach Islamic tradition through either a literalist or apologetic lens. Rather, he reinterpreted the Islamic intellectual heritage in order to maintain its relevance within a modern and plural society. His position closely resembles Hassan Hanafi's concept of *Al-Turath wa al-Tajdid*, which treats tradition as an intellectual resource that must be reconstructed to address contemporary challenges (Hanafi, 1980). Within this framework, Ahmad Syafii Maarif did not reject Islamic tradition; instead, he placed it within a productive dialogue with democracy, pluralism, and Indonesian nationalism. Through this approach, Islam appears not as an exclusive identity that restricts social relations but as a source of humanitarian ethics that strengthens collective life.

Accordingly, Ahmad Syafii Maarif developed the concept of National Islam (*Islam Kebangsaan*), which integrates Islamic values, universal humanity, and Indonesian nationalism within a single inclusive and pluralistic ethical framework. Islam functions as a moral source that strengthens social solidarity, while pluralism, democracy, and nationhood serve as arenas for realizing the universal values of Islam within a diverse society.

The Relevance of Ahmad Syafii Maarif's National Islam in Addressing Contemporary Identity Politics in Indonesia

The development of Indonesian politics in the post-Reform era demonstrates that religious identity remains an important instrument in political contestation. Political actors use religious sentiments not only to build political solidarity but also to create social boundaries between "us" and "them." This phenomenon became particularly evident during the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election, when allegations of blasphemy associated with interpretations of Q.S. *al-Mā'idah* verse 51 evolved into a powerful instrument of political mobilization that extended beyond programmatic debates. The emergence of mass movements such as the 212 Defending Islam Movement (*Aksi Bela Islam 212*) and the 505 Movement (*Aksi 505*) demonstrated that religious identity could transform into an effective political force capable of influencing electoral preferences while simultaneously generating social polarization within the public sphere (Ahyar & Alfitri, 2019).

This situation reflects Ahmad Syafii Maarif's concerns regarding identity politics. He viewed identity politics as an expression of group interests that emerge from experiences of domination and marginalization, yet he warned that it becomes dangerous when it transforms into an exclusive political ideology (Maarif, 2010, p. 4). According to him, the use of religious identity as an instrument for political competition tends to encourage anti-pluralist, anti-democratic, and anti-nationalist attitudes that ultimately threaten national unity (Maarif, 2010, pp. 85–87). Therefore, the primary problem of identity politics does not lie in the existence of identity itself but in its transformation into a political tool that prioritizes group interests above the common good.

The political polarization that emerged during the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election continued into the 2019 presidential election. The contest between Joko Widodo and Prabowo Subianto generated political divisions that became popularly known through the labels "*cebong*" and "*kampret*" (Lubis, 2019). This polarization did not remain confined to political elites; it spread into broader social life through social media platforms, religious organizations, and grassroots communities. Studies have shown that political actors employed religious symbols as a strategy of political mobilization that

reinforced identity-based divisions among Muslim voters. This polarization even evolved into forms of political fanaticism that hindered public dialogue and narrowed the space for democratic deliberation (Sucahyo, 2022).

Within this context, Ahmad Syafii Maarif's critique of the ideologization of religion becomes increasingly relevant. He rejected the use of religion as a tool of political mobilization because he believed that religion primarily functions as a source of morality and public ethics rather than as an instrument for acquiring political power (Maarif, 2018, pp. 143–145). When political actors reduce religion to a political identity, religion loses its transformative function and becomes merely a means of legitimizing particular group interests. Such conditions not only undermine democratic life but also increase the risk of horizontal conflicts among social groups. Consequently, Ahmad Syafii Maarif positioned national solidarity as a principle that should transcend both identity-based politics and sectarian affiliations.

The 2024 general election demonstrated a different pattern from the previous electoral contests. Identity-based political narratives continued to appear in public discourse, but their intensity declined compared to the period between 2017 and 2019. The Ministry of Communication and Digital Affairs (*Kementerian Komunikasi dan Digital*) (2024) reported a reduction in the use of identity politics and political disinformation during the 2024 election campaign. Government officials also argued that Indonesian society had developed greater political maturity after experiencing the negative consequences of polarization during previous elections. This trend suggests that political preferences have gradually shifted toward more programmatic and pragmatic issues rather than symbolic mobilization based on religious identity.

This transformation can be interpreted through Ahmad Syafii Maarif's concept of National Islam (*Islam Kebangsaan*). In his perspective, the relationship between Islam and Indonesia should not be established through the formalization of religion within the state. Instead, it should emerge through the internalization of Islamic values into public life. Principles such as justice (*al-'adālah*), equality (*al-musāwāh*), trustworthiness (*amanah*), and deliberation (*al-syūrā*) constitute the normative foundations of a democratic and inclusive political order (Maarif, 1996, pp. 193–194). Consequently, the success of Islamic politics should not be measured by the dominance of religious symbols in public life but by its capacity to promote social welfare, protect citizens' rights, and respect diversity.

This position demonstrates that Ahmad Syafii Maarif proposed a model of citizenship politics that places citizens, rather than religious identities or specific groups, at the center of political life. Islam continues to play an important role in the public sphere, but it fulfills this role through moral, ethical, and universal humanitarian contributions. This perspective aligns with studies that identify Ahmad Syafii Maarif as a representative of humanistic Islam who sought to reconcile Islamic values with democracy, pluralism, and Indonesian national identity (Beck, 2018; Burhani, 2013; Dewi, 2021; Haq, 2025).

From a theoretical perspective, Ahmad Syafii Maarif's thought can be understood as a synthesis between Hassan Hanafi's *Al-Turāth wa al-Tajdīd* and Abdul Karim Soroush's *Qabdh wa Bast*. From Hassan Hanafi, he adopted the spirit of reconstructing Islamic tradition so that it could respond effectively to the challenges of modernity and nationhood (Hanafi, 1980). From Abdul Karim Soroush, he adopted the distinction between religion as an immutable truth (*immutable religion*) and human understanding of religion as a dynamic and evolving process (*mutable religious understanding*) (Soroush, 1990). This synthesis produced the concept of National Islam (*Islam Kebangsaan*), which avoids both traditionalist conservatism and radical secularism. Islam remains a source of values, but society adapts its implementation to the socio-political realities of Indonesia's plural society.

Therefore, identity politics based on religious sentiments tends to intensify social polarization and hinder democratic consolidation. In contrast, Ahmad Syafii Maarif's concept of National Islam offers a political model that places justice, humanity, deliberation, pluralism, and national solidarity at the center of public life. This perspective suggests that the future of Islamic politics in Indonesia does not depend on expanding religious symbols within state institutions. Instead, it depends on the ability to cultivate a public ethic capable of strengthening pluralistic democracy and enhancing national social cohesion.

Discussion

Ahmad Syafii Maarif's thought on the relationship between religion, the state, and nationhood begins with the conviction that Islam cannot be reduced to either a political ideology or an instrument for acquiring power. His critique of the concept of *ad-din wa ad-daulah* demonstrates that the central issue in political life does not lie in the form of the state itself but in the state's ability to realize justice, humanity, and public welfare for all citizens (Maarif, 2006, p. 129). This position explains why Ahmad Syafii Maarif rejected both the formalization of Islam within state institutions and secularism that completely separates religion from public life. In his view, religion and the state are two entities that require one another, yet they possess fundamentally different characteristics. Religion is normative and transcendent, whereas the state is a historical institution that continuously changes according to social developments (Maarif, 1996, pp. 195–196).

This perspective closely resembles Abdul Karim Soroush's theory of *Qabdh wa Bast*. Soroush (1990) distinguishes religion as immutable revelation from human understanding of religion, which continuously develops according to social and historical contexts. Within this framework, Ahmad Syafii Maarif's critique of the Islamic state should not be interpreted as a rejection of Islam's role in public life but rather as a rejection of the sacralization of particular political forms. The state possesses no fixed theological status; therefore, society must determine its form and system through political *ijtihad* that considers social needs and historical realities. This finding expands existing interpretations of Ahmad Syafii Maarif's thought, which have often emphasized pluralism and democracy. The foundation of his intellectual framework actually lies in the distinction between religion as a source of values and politics as a historically contingent sphere of practice.

This interpretation complements previous studies on Ahmad Syafii Maarif. Burhani (2013) demonstrated Fazlur Rahman's influence on Ahmad Syafii Maarif's Islamic reformism, while Beck et al. (2018) and Jubba et al. (2022) identified him as a major representative of moderate Indonesian Islam. However, these studies did not specifically explain how his critique of the Islamic state emerged from an epistemological structure that distinguishes religion from religious understanding. Consequently, the issue of Islam–state relations in Ahmad Syafii Maarif's thought concerns not only democracy and pluralism but also the broader question of how religion should be understood within an ever-changing modern society.

The next finding indicates that Ahmad Syafii Maarif's rejection of the Islamic state closely relates to his concept of National Islam (*Islam Kebangsaan*). National Islam does not position nationalism as the opposite of religion; instead, it views nationalism as the historical arena in which Islamic values become actualized in collective life. Because Indonesia was built upon ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity, Islam must function as a moral force capable of bridging these differences. In this context, pluralism is not merely a political strategy for managing diversity but an ethical consequence of Islamic teachings that place all human beings in an equal position as God's creatures (Maarif, 2010, pp. 85–87).

This position shares similarities with Hassan Hanafi's concept of *Al-Turāth wa al-Tajdīd*, which treats tradition as a resource that must be reconstructed to address contemporary challenges (Hanafi, 1980). Nevertheless, Ahmad Syafii Maarif advanced this framework further by positioning Indonesia's historical experience as the arena for the realization of Islamic values. Whereas Hanafi sought to reconstruct Islamic tradition to facilitate the revival of Muslim civilization, Ahmad Syafii Maarif employed Islamic tradition to strengthen Indonesian democracy, pluralism, and nationalism. Consequently, National Islam functions not only as a religious concept but also as a social and political strategy for maintaining national cohesion within a plural society.

This finding also expands the conclusions of Ridwan (2021), Sofjan (2020), Dewi (2021), and Haq (2025), who highlighted the humanistic dimension of Ahmad Syafii Maarif's thought. These studies successfully demonstrated the importance of humanitarian values in his intellectual framework, yet they did not thoroughly explain the political function of those values. In the context of this study, National Islam functions not only as a humanitarian ethic but also as a normative instrument for reducing identity-based exclusivism that threatens national integration.

The relevance of these ideas becomes even clearer when viewed against the rise of identity politics in contemporary Indonesian democracy. The mobilization of religious sentiments during the 2017

Jakarta gubernatorial election and the political polarization that developed during the 2019 presidential election demonstrate that religious identity is frequently used as a tool for political mobilization. These developments reinforce Ahmad Syafii Maarif's concern that religion-based identity politics can generate anti-pluralist, anti-democratic, and anti-nationalist attitudes (Maarif, 2010, pp. 85–87). Identity politics no longer functions as a means of defending marginalized groups; instead, it has evolved into an instrument that deepens social fragmentation.

Within this situation, National Islam offers a different alternative. Ahmad Syafii Maarif places justice, humanity, deliberation, and national solidarity at the center of political life. This perspective shifts political orientation away from symbols and identities toward the substance of public ethics. Good politics should not be measured by the extent to which religious symbols dominate public space but by its capacity to promote social justice and protect human dignity. Therefore, the solution to identity politics is not to remove religion from public life but to restore religion to its primary function as a source of morality and social ethics.

Unlike previous studies that examined Ahmad Syafii Maarif in relation to pluralism, Islamic education, humanistic Islam, or Islam–state relations, this study demonstrates that National Islam constitutes a synthesis between the reconstruction of Islamic tradition formulated by Hassan Hanafi and the distinction between religion and religious understanding developed by Abdul Karim Soroush. This synthesis produces a normative framework that enables Islam to function as a source of public ethics while simultaneously serving as an intellectual mechanism for mitigating identity politics within a plural democratic society. Therefore, the primary contribution of this study lies in its argument that National Islam represents not merely an Indonesian Islamic identity but also a conceptual strategy for strengthening democracy, pluralism, and national integration amid the growing challenges of contemporary identity politics.

The theoretical implication of this finding is the need to expand the study of Indonesian political Islam beyond debates concerning the Islamic state toward broader discussions of public ethics and citizenship. Practically, Ahmad Syafii Maarif's thought can serve as a foundation for Islamic organizations, educational institutions, and political actors seeking to develop civic education, strengthen pluralism literacy, and promote more inclusive political practices oriented toward the common good rather than the mobilization of religious identities.

4. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Ahmad Syafii Maarif developed a conception of Islamic political thought based on a distinction between religion as a source of transcendent values and the state as a dynamic historical institution. From this perspective, he rejected the concept of *ad-din wa ad-daulah* as well as various forms of religious formalization that transform Islam into a state ideology or an instrument of identity politics. Ahmad Syafii Maarif positioned Islam as a source of public ethics that guides social, political, and national life through the values of justice, humanity, deliberation, and solidarity. This perspective gave rise to the concept of National Islam (*Islam Kebangsaan*), which integrates Islamic values with pluralism, democracy, and Indonesian nationalism. Within the context of contemporary Indonesian politics, this concept offers an alternative to religion-based identity politics, which tends to intensify social polarization and hinder democratic consolidation.

The primary contribution of this study lies in its reconstruction of Ahmad Syafii Maarif's thought through a dialogue between Hassan Hanafi's *Al-Turāth wa al-Tajdīd* and Abdul Karim Soroush's *Qabdh wa Bast*. The study demonstrates that National Islam is not merely a discourse of pluralism or religious nationalism but rather a synthesis between the reconstruction of Islamic tradition and a dynamic understanding of religion within changing socio-political contexts. This finding expands existing scholarship on Ahmad Syafii Maarif, which has largely focused on pluralism, Islamic education, and humanistic Islam, by demonstrating that National Islam can function as a normative framework for addressing identity politics in plural democratic societies. Consequently, this study contributes theoretically to contemporary Islamic thought and offers a new perspective on the relationship between Islam, democracy, and nationhood in Indonesia.

This study has several limitations. It focuses on a figure study and textual analysis and therefore does not empirically examine how the concept of National Islam has been implemented by Islamic organizations, educational institutions, political parties, or civil society groups in contemporary socio-political practice. Furthermore, the study does not provide a systematic comparison between Ahmad Syafii Maarif and other contemporary Muslim thinkers who share similar concerns regarding pluralism, democracy, and nationhood. Future research may therefore conduct comparative studies between Ahmad Syafii Maarif and figures such as Fazlur Rahman, Nurcholish Madjid, Abdurrahman Wahid, or Abdul Karim Soroush. Future studies may also examine the relevance of National Islam in addressing identity politics, social polarization, and the evolving dynamics of Indonesian democracy in the digital age.

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