

MUZAKIR MANAF'S POLITICAL STRATEGY IN THE 2024 ACEH GUBERNATORIAL ELECTION: A SYMBIOTIC NARRATIVE OF ISLAM AND ACEHNESE IDENTITY

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Abstract. This study analyzes the political strategy of Muzakir Manaf in the 2024 Aceh gubernatorial election, focusing on his use of identity politics, digital adaptation, and principles of Islamic political thought. Employing a qualitative method with a case study approach, data were gathered through in-depth interviews, documentary analysis, and limited observation. The findings reveal that Muzakir Manaf's political maneuvering was predicated on a blend of his party's structural power, a historical narrative rooted in Acehese symbolism and struggle, and a symbiotic strategy linking political action to Islamic values. This approach successfully forged an emotional connection with his traditional voter base and the *ulama* (Islamic scholars), thereby strengthening an image of leadership grounded in morality. However, his campaign team demonstrated a significant weakness in its digital communication strategy, characterized by a non-confrontational response to emergent issues and disinformation, which risked damaging his credibility. The study also uncovers a shifting orientation among young voters, who are increasingly rational and demand moral consistency and tangible performance over mere symbolism. Overall, this research contributes to the understanding of political leadership adaptation in post-conflict Aceh. It underscores the importance of balancing historical legacies with inclusive contemporary political demands and the necessity for leaders to adapt to an increasingly critical and digitally savvy electorate.

Keywords: Political Strategy; Muzakir Manaf; 2024 Aceh Gubernatorial Election; Identity Politics; Islamic Politics.

I. INTRODUCTION

The political transition in Aceh following the 2005 Helsinki Peace Agreement has precipitated a fundamental change, shifting the region from armed conflict to a formal democratic system. This agreement not only ceased hostilities but also paved the way for ex-combatants of the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) to participate in politics through local parties, such as the Aceh Party (Partai Aceh). Edward Aspinall emphasizes that this shift from armed legitimacy to electoral legitimacy marked a new chapter in the relationship between the Acehese people and the state [1]. In this context, the existence of local political parties became one of the most significant implications of the peace accord, with the Aceh Party (PA) emerging as the primary political channel for former GAM fighters to articulate their political aspirations and preserve their Acehese identity within a new democratic order.

However, the dynamics of post-conflict politics in Aceh do not exist in a vacuum. They are perpetually shaped by the collective memory of conflict, past trauma, hopes for sustainable peace, and new, ever-adapting power structures. Local parties like the Aceh Party play a pivotal role in safeguarding this unique political identity amidst the pressures and dominance of national politics. Studies by

Janah et al. and Zulfan et al. indicate that these local parties function not only as mediators between the aspirations of the Acehese people and the national political system but also as tangible symbols of the region's hard-won autonomy and special status [2], [3]. Nevertheless, contemporary political contests are no longer solely determined by historical identity or narratives of past struggles. They are also profoundly influenced by a candidate's ability to address modern challenges, including digital transformation, demands for clean and transparent governance, and the active engagement of the younger generation. Therefore, the dynamics of the 2024 Aceh gubernatorial election serve as a crucial arena to test the extent to which local parties can adapt to the more complex demands of modern democracy.

Muzakir Manaf, as a central figure in Acehese politics, holds immense symbolic value. His prominent role within the GAM command structure during the conflict has endowed him with an image of leadership rooted in a narrative of struggle. This image has been a dominant political branding strategy in various electoral contests in Aceh [4]. However, his political history is not without its challenges. His track record in the 2017 regional election with T.A. Khalid revealed serious obstacles faced by the Aceh Party, ranging from internal conflicts and shifts in voter preferences to issues with

party performance [5]. These challenges are compounded by the emergence of an increasingly heterogeneous electorate, particularly among the more critical and technologically literate youth. Saiful Mujani et al. underscore that post-reformasi Indonesian voters tend to be more rational and critical, especially in evaluating political promises that are not grounded in reality and a concrete track record [6]. Consequently, a political strategy based solely on emotion and symbolism is no longer sufficient.

The massive digital transformation has fundamentally altered the landscape of political communication. The use of social media has now become a primary instrument for candidates to communicate directly with the public [7]. The success of a candidate like Muzakir Manaf in the 2024 gubernatorial election will be significantly determined by his ability to leverage these digital platforms, not only for campaigning but also for building sustained public dialogue and trust. Nonetheless, the digitalization of politics also carries risks. Political campaigns are often marred by disinformation (hoaxes), identity-based polarization, and money politics, which contradict the principles of political ethics. Kurniawan et al. warn that media framing of candidates plays a substantial role in shaping public perception and is often not free from ideological bias or economic interests [8]. Therefore, formulating a political communication strategy grounded in ethical and educational values has become an essential prerequisite for winning the hearts of voters without undermining democratic integrity.

Within the framework of Islamic political thought, the discourse on integrating Islamic values with democratic principles is crucial for understanding the political dynamics in Aceh. As the only province in Indonesia with special autonomy to implement Islamic law (*shari'a*), Aceh serves as a unique political laboratory for integrating Islamic values into governance [9], [10]. A candidate's political strategy in Aceh must, therefore, reflect a sensitivity to Islamic moral values, affirming a commitment to justice, consultation (*musyawarah*), and leadership with integrity.

On the other hand, the internal dynamics of the Aceh Party present a challenge in itself. The party has experienced internal fragmentation due to leadership conflicts and the emergence of other local parties, such as the Nanggroe Aceh Party (PNA) [11]. Although initiatives like the establishment of Muda Seudang as the party's youth wing for cadre development have been undertaken [12], the success of internal consolidation remains a critical factor. Furthermore, sensitive issues raised by Muzakir Manaf, such as the discourse on a referendum, are laden with ideological weight and memories of conflict. Muhammad Jafar notes that such rhetoric, while potentially reinforcing the loyalty of long-standing supporters, also risks provoking resistance from a newer cohort of voters who prioritize stability and economic development [13].

Although extensive research has examined the role of the Aceh Party or the dynamics of post-conflict politics in Aceh, studies specifically analyzing Muzakir Manaf's political strategy within the framework of Islamic political thought

remain limited. Most of the literature has focused on historical dimensions or conflict-related aspects, with few exploring how the combination of Islamic identity, digital communication strategies, and symbolic politics is leveraged to construct a contemporary political narrative. Therefore, the novelty of this research lies in its integration of an analysis of a political figure's campaign strategy with the perspective of Islamic political thought relevant to the unique context of Aceh. This study not only explains campaign strategy as an electoral phenomenon but also as a reflection of a post-conflict political transformation that must confront modern demands and Islamic ethics.

This research offers original contributions in two main aspects. First, it combines the approach of Islamic political thought with the study of campaign strategy within the complex local context of Aceh. Second, it evaluates the effectiveness of Muzakir Manaf's political strategy in confronting the challenges posed by a new generation of voters, digital transformation, and internal party fragmentation. Through this approach, the research is expected to enrich the study of Islamic political science and local democracy in post-conflict contexts, while also providing a deeper understanding of political leadership adaptation amidst the demands of a changing era.

Political Strategy in the Perspective of Political Science

Political strategy is a key element in the process of power contestation within democratic political systems. In the context of political science, strategy is understood as a series of planned actions designed to achieve specific political objectives, whether short-term, such as electoral victory, or long-term, such as the consolidation of power. Political strategy is not merely technical; it also contains ideological, narrative, and symbolic content that varies according to the social, cultural, and institutional context of a region.

The ability of political actors to strategically select and manage issues is one of the most fundamental components of political strategy. The issues raised during a campaign do not only reflect the objective needs of society but are also the result of political calculations that consider the candidate's strengths, weaknesses, and ideological position. Meier, Bazo, & Elswiler argue that political parties tend to emphasize specific issues that can strengthen their position in the public eye, especially on digital platforms like Twitter, where the framing and intensity of message dissemination are crucial [14]. Issue framing itself is an integral part of strategic political communication that decisively shapes voter perception. For example, Brown & Sovacool show how the issues of climate change and energy policy were treated differently by candidates in the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign, reflecting policy orientations as well as efforts to build a particular image [15]. Therefore, the ability to convey a simple yet powerful political message becomes a vital asset for winning voter sympathy.

Strategic communication also encompasses efforts to control public discourse through conventional mass media and digital media. In the digital age, which is rife with narrative competition, the speed and accuracy of response are

critical, as messages can spread in seconds. It is here that data-driven communication strategies, audience segmentation, and visual narratives play a vital role, enabling candidates to consistently build voter trust and loyalty. However, not all issues have the same electoral appeal; issues such as cultural identity, religion, and security often have a higher resonance, particularly in societies with a strong history of conflict. Consequently, political actors frequently combine technocratic issues (e.g., the economy) with symbolic issues (identity and religion) to reach a broader spectrum of voters—a practice highly relevant in the context of Aceh, which is rich in Acehnese symbolism and Islamic values. The success of a political strategy is ultimately determined by how issues are selected, framed, and effectively communicated to the public.

Political strategy focuses not only on communication but also on how power is managed, mobilized, and maintained through careful planning. Arterton explains that political strategy involves a blend of power acquisition, the effective use of power, and ethical considerations in democratic practice [16]. In this regard, politicians are required to be meticulous planners and negotiators, not just communicators. Strategic planning includes the analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT), which is conducted through field research, surveys, and data-based calculations. This model views power as an entity that can be calculated and obtained through systematic work, not merely through rhetoric.

Analytical approaches such as game theory are also often used to understand political strategy. Niou and Ordeshook demonstrate how this theory can model electoral processes, coalition formation, and political maneuvers, where each candidate's action is considered based on the potential responses from opponents and voters [17]. Through this approach, we can understand why candidates sometimes choose compromise over confrontation or adopt a moderate stance to attract a wider segment of the electorate. However, power is not neutral; it always operates within complex power relations between elites, institutions, and society. Therefore, political strategy must also consider the prevailing institutional structure, such as the electoral system and campaign regulations. In the case of Aceh, the existence of the Law on the Governing of Aceh (UUPA) provides greater space for local actors to design distinctive strategies.

Political strategy in many regions is often closely intertwined with ethnicity and group identity, making it an important instrument for gaining political support. Faanu and Graham, in their research on elections in Ghana, show that political parties strategically use ethnic ties to attract votes, even if this leads to primordial voting behavior [18]. This phenomenon demonstrates that identity politics, though risky, remains a powerful electoral weapon in pluralistic societies. In Indonesia, issues of ethnicity, religion, and regionalism often appear in political campaigns, where candidates frequently present themselves as a “son of the soil” (*putra daerah*) to gain legitimacy. This strategy is highly relevant in regions with a history of conflict or strong regionalist sentiment, such as Aceh.

However, ethnopolitical strategies carry risks. If not accompanied by an inclusive narrative, this strategy has the potential to reinforce exclusivism and social polarization. Therefore, it is important for candidates to package identity issues as a cultural strength that enriches a vision for development, not as a divisive symbol. In the context of Aceh, the use of GAM's struggle symbols, the Helsinki MoU narrative, or the representation of Islamic law are inseparable parts of an identity strategy. Muzakir Manaf, as a former GAM Commander and chairman of the Aceh Party, strategically utilizes collective memory and symbols of struggle to strengthen his electoral base. Theoretically, an identity strategy can be an effective tool for political consolidation if combined with an inclusive national narrative and a clear policy platform, which can ultimately contribute positively to a participatory local democracy rooted in the cultural values of the community.

Islamic Political Theory

Islamic political theory is a branch of political thought deeply rooted in religious values, as well as the historical and social contexts of the Muslim community. Within this framework, politics is not viewed merely as a struggle for power, but as part of a moral responsibility and an act of worship (*ibadah*) to realize the well-being of the community (*ummah*). Fundamental concepts such as *'adl* (justice), *shura* (consultation), and *maslahah* (public interest) serve as the ethical foundation for assessing the legitimacy of any authority [19]. Muqtedar Khan also emphasizes that the ideal government in the Islamic political tradition is one that serves the community, upholds morality, and enforces social justice [20]. Therefore, this theory functions not only normatively but also as an ethical framework for evaluating contemporary power practices, including in the context of Aceh.

The development of Islamic political theory has undergone a long historical dynamic, from the classical caliphate era to the modern age. Thinkers such as al-Mawardi and Ibn Khaldun made significant contributions to shaping an early conception of Islamic politics that was rational yet rooted in religious values [19], [21]. Al-Mawardi, for example, composed *Al-Ahkam al-Sultaniyyah* as a normative guide on Islamic governance, emphasizing the legality of leadership and the supremacy of God's law [22]. On the other hand, Ibn Khaldun added a historical-sociological dimension with his theory of *'asabiyyah*, which explains the role of social solidarity as the primary force in the survival of a state [23]. This interplay between normative texts and historical-political experience makes the intellectual tradition of Islamic politics exceptionally rich and contextually flexible.

Entering the 20th century, Islamic political thought underwent a significant transformation through figures like Sayyid Qutb and Abul A'la Maududi. They fiercely criticized secularism and colonialism and formulated the idea of an “Islamic State” based on *shari'a*. Sayyid Qutb stressed the importance of *hakimiyyah* (God's sovereignty) as the fundamental principle of politics, rejecting Western democratic systems that he believed placed humans as the source of law [20], [24]. Meanwhile, Maududi developed the

concept of “theodemocracy,” a system that combines God’s sovereignty with community participation through the mechanism of *shura* [24]. These two thinkers became a major inspiration for many modern Islamist movements, and their ideas continue to influence contemporary Islamic political discourse.

In contemporary discourse, Islamic political theory is divided into several main paradigms, one of which is the integralistic approach. This paradigm views religion and politics as a single, unified whole, wherein Islam governs all aspects of life, including government and law [22], [25]. This approach holds that only a *shari’*a-based system can bring true justice and often rejects the dichotomy between secular and religious knowledge. Conversely, the secularistic approach attempts to separate the domain of religion from state affairs, viewing Islam as a source of ethical and moral values in politics, rather than as a formal legal system [21], [22]. This approach developed in countries with pluralistic societies, such as Indonesia and Turkey, and has drawn criticism from integralistic groups as a form of compromise with Western secularism.

Between these two poles, a symbiotic approach has emerged that seeks to bridge the two. This paradigm positions Islam as a source of ethical and moral values that guide the political process without necessarily controlling it directly [9], [10]. The symbiotic approach believes that Islamic values such as justice, trustworthiness (*amanah*), and consultation (*musyawarah*) are highly compatible with the principles of modern democracy and can strengthen democratic institutions without sacrificing pluralism and citizens’ rights. In the context of Aceh, this paradigm is highly relevant as it reflects the effort to blend local, religious, and democratic values within a single framework of governance. The symbiotic approach provides a space for Islam to be present constructively and inclusively in the public sphere.

Ultimately, one of the central debates in modern Islamic political theory is the relationship between Islam and democracy. Although some circles view democratic principles as contradictory to the doctrine of *hakimiyyah* [20], many contemporary Islamic thinkers see democracy as a means to achieve social justice and community participation, which are also values within Islam. Benhenda shows that procedural democracy is compatible with the concepts of *shura* and accountability in Islam [26]. The successful integration of Islam and democracy in Muslim-majority countries, such as Indonesia, proves that the two do not have to be in opposition but can mutually reinforce one another.

Local Politics in Aceh After the Conflict and the Helsinki MoU

The Helsinki peace agreement on August 15, 2005, was a crucial turning point that ended nearly three decades of armed conflict between the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) and the Indonesian government. This agreement served not only as a ceasefire but also as a transformational instrument that turned militant actors into formal political actors [27], [28]. Through this MoU, a new phase of local politics in Aceh began, based on the principles of reconciliation, justice, and broader

political participation. Wandu explains that the implementation of this MoU enabled the revocation of the Military Operations Zone (DOM) status, the withdrawal of non-organic troops, and the institutionalization of political rights for the Acehnese people, including the right to form local political parties, which other provinces do not have [29].

The Helsinki MoU carries profound symbolic meaning: state recognition of the history and suffering of the Acehnese people, and a guarantee that Aceh’s political future would be determined by its own people [28]. Therefore, the agreement provided new legitimacy for the local political process and became a foundation for post-conflict political studies. It is important to analyze the extent to which the values promoted in the MoU—especially those related to reconciliation and justice—have been genuinely implemented in the political and governmental dynamics in Aceh.

One of the key components of the Helsinki MoU was the implementation of the Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) process for former GAM combatants, which aimed to integrate them into civilian life through political, economic, and social channels [28], [29]. This process occurred in stages, from the decommissioning of weapons to the establishment of social assistance schemes. Lee notes the initial success of DDR in preventing large-scale post-demobilization violence, which was an essential prerequisite for political stability [30]. However, the greatest challenges emerged during the reintegration phase, where many former fighters felt they did not receive fair access to empowerment programs or social assistance, giving rise to internal instability within local political parties.

Wandu also highlights a significant weakness in the reintegration scheme: the neglect of female ex-combatants [29]. The absence of a gender-based approach in the DDR program led to marginalization, where some former female fighters returned to marginal lives without proper recognition or support. Overall, the DDR program successfully curbed armed conflict, but its success as a fair and inclusive process remains questionable. This indicates that post-conflict recovery requires more than just security aspects; it also demands profound social and distributive justice.

The granting of broad political autonomy through the Helsinki MoU was a monumental achievement, giving Aceh the right to form local political parties. This became a symbol of reconciliation and a new form of political expression that accommodated Aceh’s history of struggle within the framework of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia. The Aceh Party (PA), founded by GAM ex-combatants, became the first local party to immediately garner significant electoral support [29]. The Aceh Party successfully integrated the spirit of Acehnese nationalism into a formal legal-political path. The existence of local parties allowed for stronger oversight of the implementation of the Law on the Governing of Aceh (UUPA) and strengthened community participation in determining the direction of regional development.

Nevertheless, local parties in Aceh face significant internal challenges, particularly elite fragmentation and competition among factions originating from the same struggle

background. Zulfan, Ikramatoun, and Aminah note that these internal tensions have led to a decline in party performance, both electorally and in formulating inclusive policies [3]. On the other hand, high public expectations of local parties have slowly turned to disappointment due to weak public services and a lack of policy innovation. Therefore, although local parties are symbols of local political sovereignty, their role in Aceh's democracy still faces fluctuating dynamics. The challenges of regeneration, internal consolidation, and ideological maturity remain major tasks for the survival of local parties amidst increasingly pluralistic competition.

Voter Behavior and Electoral Segmentation in the Digital Era

The development of information and communication technology has brought about a fundamental change in the way voters access political information and interact with campaigns. This transformation has changed voters from passive consumers to active actors who participate in discussions, disseminate information, and even influence public opinion. In the era of digital democracy, campaign strategies are no longer unidirectional but interactive and multidimensional, forcing candidates to adapt to an ever-evolving media landscape. Consequently, the analysis of voter behavior must now consider the central role of technology in shaping electoral preferences and loyalties.

Social media has become a primary political instrument for building a candidate's image and disseminating political messages directly. Research by Mannonen and Skippiari as well as Arteaga and Clark shows that digital platforms allow candidates to reach voters in a more personal and responsive manner, which is effective in building emotional bonds [31], [32]. The presence of social media has also become an open space for shaping public perception and consolidating political identity. It is here that visual narratives and engaging content play a crucial role in shaping support among younger voter segments.

Furthermore, digital campaign strategies now leverage digital data to target voter groups with personalized messages, or micro-targeting. Rosário, Lopes, and Rosário note that this technique utilizes data to increase the effectiveness of political communication, promising higher efficiency [33]. A similar strategy is affirmed by Rahyadi and Aras as well as Owen, who show how data analysis allows candidates to craft highly specific campaign messages tailored to voter needs [34], [35]. However, this approach raises serious ethical challenges related to data privacy, opinion manipulation, and information transparency, often making it a double-edged sword in a democracy.

Voter behavior in the digital era is also heavily influenced by demographic and geographical differences. The younger generation, particularly the 18–24 age group, are active social media users who are highly responsive to progressive issues and creative visual campaigns [32]. Conversely, voters from older age groups tend to maintain a preference for conventional media such as television and newspapers as their primary sources of information. In addition, the digital divide between urban and rural areas is also a significant factor, where digital campaigns tend to be less effective in remote

areas due to limitations in infrastructure and internet access [31], [36], [37].

Despite offering new opportunities, the digital political landscape is also marked by significant challenges, especially the emergence of polarization and ideological acculturation. Grover et al. highlight that digital platforms often reinforce existing views and create "echo chambers," which ultimately weaken constructive democratic dialogue [38]. This polarization is exacerbated by the spread of misinformation and hoaxes that can damage public trust in electoral institutions and even trigger social conflict [39], [40]. This phenomenon shows that the supposedly open digital public sphere has the potential to become an arena of division.

The influence of digital technology on political participation is also varied. Belloc found that digital media can decrease voter turnout by creating information dissonance or political apathy [41]. However, on the other hand, social media can also increase political awareness and engagement, especially among youth. This difference indicates that the impact of digital technology on political participation is not linear but is influenced by the social context, level of digital literacy, and the intensity of technology use itself.

Therefore, the expanding use of digital technology demands a strong ethical and regulatory framework. Research by Younus et al., Cheeseman et al., and Ünal suggests the need for public policies that protect the integrity of the democratic process, such as regulations on political content, transparency in data use, and protection of voters from digital manipulation [42], [43], [44]. The formulation of these policies must involve multi-stakeholder collaboration from the technology, legal, and civil society sectors to build a healthy digital democracy that is inclusive and sustainable. Thus, campaign strategies must be adapted to the demographic and geographical characteristics of each region, combining digital and traditional approaches adaptively to gain a competitive advantage.

II. RESEARCH METHODS

This research employs a qualitative approach with a case study design. The qualitative approach was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of a complex and contextual social phenomenon, where the subjective meanings and perspectives of the actors are crucial data [45]. Through this approach, the researcher can holistically explore the political strategy implemented by Muzakir Manaf, particularly from the perspective of Islamic political thought. The case study design was specifically applied because the research focus is on a single, unique phenomenon: the political strategy of a public figure in the 2024 Aceh gubernatorial election. This design allows for a deep examination of the historical, social, and symbolic elements that shape local political dynamics, consistent with Moleong's view, which emphasizes understanding social reality contextually [46].

This research was conducted in Aceh Province, with a primary focus on several regions that are key political bases for the Aceh Party and Muzakir Manaf, namely Banda Aceh,

North Aceh, East Aceh, Central Aceh, Gayo Lues, and Southeast Aceh. The selection of these locations was based on considerations of geopolitical and demographic representation, as they serve as electoral strongholds and ideological bases for the candidate. Research participants were selected purposively based on their roles, positions, and relevance to the phenomenon under study. They were grouped into four main categories: (1) Muzakir Manaf's campaign team and strategic partners; (2) religious figures and *ulama* (Islamic scholars); (3) academics and political observers; and (4) voters and supporters from various backgrounds. The option to add new participants was maintained if field data indicated a need for significant additional information.

Data were collected through three main techniques: in-depth interviews, documentary analysis, and limited participant observation. In-depth interviews were conducted semi-structurally, allowing participants the space to develop free-flowing narratives while still being guided by thematic questions. This technique facilitated the exploration of personal experiences, opinions, and political motivations. Documentary analysis was conducted on written sources, such as media reports, political party publications, official election documents, and digital content, which served to support and confirm findings from the interviews. Finally, limited participant observation was conducted selectively during the campaign and post-election period to capture symbolic expressions, communication styles, and the use of public space. These three complementary techniques were applied as a form of triangulation to enhance the depth and validity of the qualitative data [46].

Data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach, conducted concurrently with the data collection process. This process consisted of three main stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Data reduction involved grouping interview, observation, and documentary data into major themes relevant to the research focus. The reduced data were then presented in the form of a qualitative narrative linked to the theoretical framework of Islamic political thought, political strategy, and post-conflict local dynamics. In line with Creswell's view, this iterative process of thematic analysis ensures that the resulting findings are consistent and in-depth [45].

The validity and trustworthiness of the data were ensured through several methods. Source triangulation was performed by comparing information from various participants (e.g., between political observers and religious figures) to obtain a comprehensive perspective. Technique triangulation was applied by comparing data from interviews with data from observation and documentation. Additionally, a member check was conducted by seeking re-confirmation from participants regarding the interpretation of important data. Finally, an audit trail was maintained by documenting the trail of analytical decision-making and the dynamics that occurred during the research. These procedures were implemented to increase the trustworthiness of data in qualitative research [46].

This study strictly adheres to the principles of social research ethics. Informed consent was obtained from each participant before the interviews. Anonymity and data confidentiality were maintained as requested. The researcher upheld political neutrality by not taking sides with any candidate or party. Transparency in data usage was guaranteed, with information used solely for academic purposes. Furthermore, the researcher was committed to maintaining equal relationships, respecting cultural and religious backgrounds, and upholding the values of honesty and scientific responsibility.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Muzakir Manaf's Political Strategy in the 2024 Gubernatorial Election

Muzakir Manaf's victory in the 2024 Aceh Gubernatorial Election contest cannot be separated from a blend of well-conceived political strategies. As a former Commander of the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) and the Chairman of the Aceh Party, he successfully integrated his historical strength with systematic political consolidation. This strategy was built on several main pillars, including coalition formation, leveraging his personal track record, and reinforcing an emotional narrative among the populace. This approach demonstrates how a legacy of the past can be transformed into relevant electoral capital in the modern political era.

The primary pillar of this strategy was the formation of a grand coalition that consolidated cross-party support. According to Yahdi Hassan, Muzakir Manaf's team successfully brought together approximately 15 parties, both national and local, including PKB, Demokrat, PKS, and PNA [47]. This strong political alliance reflects the application of a rational political strategy, where the ability to read the power map and forge compromises was key to success. This coalition not only broadened the support base but also provided wider legitimacy across various voter segments.

In addition to party strength, the figure of Muzakir Manaf himself was a central element of the campaign strategy. Wiyanto, a local political observer, mentioned two main factors: his widely known track record and his leadership in the Aceh Party [48]. By having his own political vehicle, he was not only an electoral representative but also a symbol of local political continuity born from a history of struggle. This aligns with theories suggesting that a candidate's personal image often carries greater weight in the context of regional elections [49].

Muzakir Manaf's campaign strategy also relied on a personal narrative that had deep emotional resonance within the community. Various voter testimonies, such as from Bima Fitra Prayoga and Deriyan Agustin, indicate that their choice was based on his past figuration and his representation of local values. This approach successfully built public trust that was not only rational but also emotional and historical, utilizing the concept of framing, which links symbolic narratives with personal experience [15].

Furthermore, his strategy was also adaptive, building connections at the national level. Anderan Fikri Amanda saw Muzakir Manaf's closeness to the president-elect as an opportunity to accelerate regional development [50]. This symbiotic political approach was complemented by a focus on concrete sectoral issues, such as his attention to healthcare, which was appreciated by drg. Windi Putri Ayu. This strategy combined local aspirations with central government power to enhance credibility and development prospects.

Nevertheless, this strategy was not without its challenges, especially in the digital realm. Wiyanto and MS Halif Yudha highlighted the campaign team's weakness in utilizing information technology to counter hoaxes and disinformation [48], [51]. This limitation shows that although conventional strengths still play a role, digital campaign management has become a crucial aspect of contemporary strategy, which, if neglected, can weaken a candidate's position.

Overall, Muzakir Manaf's primary strategy can be seen as a model that unites political rationality and symbolic cultural power within the local context of Aceh. The blend of a powerful personal narrative, structural support from the party network, a symbolic relationship with the past struggle, and an inclusive approach towards society became the key to his victory. This approach reflects well-considered steps, where his political actions were directed at minimizing the risk of conflict and maximizing opportunities for cross-group support [52].

Identity Politics, Acehese Symbolism, and the Symbiotic Strategy of Islam

The dynamics of political contestation in Aceh cannot be separated from the role of identity politics, which is deeply rooted in the history and culture of its people. In the 2024 gubernatorial election, Muzakir Manaf successfully leveraged this collective narrative by positioning himself as a figure representing Acehese symbolism and Islamic values. This strategy functioned as political capital to build an emotional connection and trust with voters, while simultaneously bridging the legacy of the past with contemporary political aspirations. This approach aligns with framing theory, which shows how symbolic narratives can influence voter perception and preferences [15].

One of the main pillars of this strategy was the symbiotic approach between politics and Islam. This was evidenced by Muzakir Manaf's closeness to the *ulama* (Islamic scholars) community and religious institutions, such as Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*). An informant with the initials YH confirmed that Muzakir Manaf has a close relationship with *pesantren* leaders throughout Aceh and provides tangible support for the development of these institutions [47]. This strategy is highly relevant in the context of Aceh as the "Veranda of Mecca," where the role of *ulama* and Islamic schools (*dayah*) are crucial nodes in guiding public opinion and shaping the moral perception of a leader [9].

However, identity politics also carries potential risks. According to informant WY, this strategy, while capable of strengthening the support base, has the potential to cause inter-group divisions due to its exclusive nature [48]. TRA

also observed the dominance of the "son of the soil" (*putra daerah*) issue, which could narrow the space for togetherness in a pluralistic society. This phenomenon is consistent with the findings of Grover et al., which show how identity politics, if not managed wisely, can reinforce fanaticism and hinder dialogue, thereby potentially threatening social harmony [38].

Nevertheless, voter assessment of identity politics and Islamic values is increasingly diverse. A large portion of voters still link a candidate's personal track record with their commitment to Islam, as exemplified by informants BFP and DA, who consider the ability to recite the Qur'an and one's life background as moral indicators [53], [54]. On the other hand, TRA noted a shift in the orientation of young voters who are beginning to regard the past struggle as a "bygone story" and demand the implementation of Islamic values in the form of tangible work programs. This indicates a differentiation in voter segmentation, where the younger generation is starting to prioritize a performative approach and concrete policies over mere ideological symbolism [3].

Overall, Muzakir Manaf's strategy of utilizing identity politics and Islamic values reflects a complex and deeply rooted model. He successfully integrated the symbolic power of Acehese identity and the structural support of religious networks. However, the sustainability of this strategy requires adaptation to the changing orientation of younger voters, who are increasingly rational and critical. To ensure future relevance, identity politics must be accompanied by accountability, transparency, and policies capable of addressing contemporary challenges, so that it does not just rely on historical legacy but also proves its ability to advance the region in an inclusive and sustainable manner.

Response to Issues and Hoaxes in the Digital Campaign

The development of social media has brought about a fundamental change in political communication, including in the 2024 Aceh Gubernatorial Election. In this context, Muzakir Manaf faced the challenge of massive disinformation and hoaxes, yet his campaign team opted for a non-confrontational strategy. This approach reveals a dissonance between the fast-paced dynamics of digital politics and a leadership style that tends to be calm, which could potentially backfire in an information environment saturated with false news [32].

This non-confrontational strategy was explained by informant YH, who mentioned that Muzakir Manaf consistently chose not to engage in debates on social media, even when attacked or when rumors spread about his health [47]. This stance can be interpreted as a form of mature self-control, but on the other hand, it could be perceived as passive by some voters. In digital politics, the absence of a response to hoaxes can create a vacuum for negative perceptions to grow unchecked, thereby damaging a carefully constructed image [31].

The weakness in this digital strategy was also acknowledged by several informants. WY suggested the importance of forming a dedicated cyber team to counter false news (hoaxes), while MHY highlighted the lack of social media advertising to correct negative news [48], [51]. This criticism

indicates a gap between the awareness of the threat of hoaxes and the implementation of an effective strategy. This limitation could be an opening exploited by political opponents, especially in a social media ecosystem vulnerable to algorithmic manipulation for the systematic spread of false narratives [39].

The strategy of silence adopted by Muzakir Manaf, although it can be viewed as a manifestation of calm political ethics, risks eroding credibility in the eyes of voters who increasingly rely on social media as a primary source of information. Without a strong clarification mechanism, hoaxes can create echo chambers that reinforce certain opinions and damage public trust in the integrity of the election [38], [40]. Therefore, in the future, political success will be determined not only by the narratives constructed but also by the ability to build an authentic, honest, and communicative digital presence in response to disinformation.

Youth Voter Segmentation and the Role of Aceh Party's Cadre Development

The younger generation constitutes a crucial voter segment in modern political contests, including the 2024 Aceh Gubernatorial Election. Muzakir Manaf managed to secure significant support from this group, especially in the central region of Aceh. This success cannot be separated from an effective segmentation strategy, supported by the role of the Aceh Party's cadre development. This shows that historical narratives and the party's structural power remain relevant, even as young voters become more critical and rational.

One of the main pillars of this strategy was the formation of party wing organizations focusing on youth and the descendants of former combatants. An informant with the initials YH mentioned the existence of *Muda Sedang* and *Anak Suhada*, which played an important role in mobilizing votes, particularly in North Aceh and Bireuen [47]. The establishment of these organizations is consistent with Anzulai's research, which identified efforts by local parties to strengthen party ideology among the younger generation, turning it into a political channel for those who did not directly experience the armed conflict but still feel responsible for Aceh's future [55].

However, the preferences of young voters are not homogenous. Several informants, such as FI, indicated that they voted based on the candidate's personal capabilities and integrity, not merely due to historical affiliation or the intervention of other parties [56]. This independent attitude shows a shift from patronage-based voting patterns towards individual political autonomy, where young voters position themselves as active political actors [3]. This poses a challenge for the Aceh Party to not only rely on historical loyalty but also to build narratives relevant to the needs of the times.

Nonetheless, the strategy of cadre development and youth voter segmentation also faces serious challenges. Research by Budiatri highlights a regeneration crisis within local parties, which tends to reinforce an elitist impression [57]. Furthermore, Zulfan et al. found that declining support for local parties is often caused by internal conflicts and failure

to fulfill political promises, which erodes public trust [3]. This condition requires the Aceh Party to carry out continuous structural and organizational cultural reforms to remain relevant in the eyes of a younger generation that demands accountability and transparency.

Overall, Muzakir Manaf's strategy for engaging young voters successfully united historical narrative strength with the reinforcement of cadre networks. However, the future sustainability of this support will be largely determined by his ability to adapt to the changing political orientations of the youth, which are increasingly dynamic, pluralistic, and rationality-based. Managing this voter segment requires a balance between preserving the legacy of struggle and proving the ability to formulate policies that address contemporary issues such as quality education, employment, and public participation.

Reflection from the Perspective of Islamic Politics

Political practice in Aceh cannot be separated from the framework of Islamic values that have long been the identity of its society. This context demands deep reflection, especially regarding the extent to which contemporary political practices, including in the 2024 gubernatorial election, align with the principles of Islamic politics. Issues such as *amanah* (trust and responsibility), *shūrā* (consultation), and the rejection of malfeasance serve as key benchmarks for assessing leadership integrity, which are also fundamental expectations of the Acehnese people.

The principle of *amanah* is fundamental in Islamic politics. Although Muzakir Manaf is viewed by some voters as a figure committed to Islamic values, there is a strong public expectation that these values be realized tangibly, not merely symbolically. This view aligns with the teachings of the Qur'an (Surah An-Nisa: 58), which emphasizes the importance of justice and entrusting responsibility to those who are entitled. However, criticism regarding the digital approach and management of campaign information indicates that a gap still exists between the idealism of Islamic politics and its practice on the ground.

Besides *amanah*, the principles of justice and consultation (*shūrā*) are essential. In Surah Ash-Shura, verse 38, consultation is emphasized as an inclusive method of decision-making. However, some segments of the public still feel that their participation in the policy process is not optimal. This indicates that the principle of *shūrā* needs to be integrated more substantially, not just as rhetoric, but also within the structures and mechanisms of decision-making [9].

Critical reflection also arises from practices that contradict Islamic political ethics. Informants TRA and WY indicated the continued presence of money politics and slander (*fitnah*), which are explicitly forbidden in Islamic teachings. This reveals a dissonance between the religious narrative built by the candidate and the reality on the ground. This phenomenon, if allowed to persist, can erode public trust and harm the quality of democracy in Aceh. Therefore, moral consistency is a primary challenge for every political actor [22], [25].

On the other hand, an inclusive practice of Islamic politics is a relevant demand in the pluralistic society of Aceh. A

comment from an informant with the initials RG, a Christian youth, affirmed the importance of involving minority groups in the political process [58]. This view is in line with the Islamic principle that values diversity, as stated in the Qur'an (Surah Al-Hujurat: 13), which calls on humanity to know and respect one another. This confirms that Islamic politics in Aceh must not be exclusive, but must be a space of fair and inclusive protection for all its citizens.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

Muzakir Manaf's victory in the 2024 Aceh gubernatorial election was the result of a comprehensive political strategy that effectively combined structural and symbolic power. His strategy successfully united a cross-party coalition, leveraged his personal track record as a leader rooted in history, and consolidated support through party wing organizations. This demonstrates that in a post-conflict political context, the ability to manage the legacy of the past is crucial capital for achieving electoral legitimacy in the modern democratic era. The identity politics strategy employed by Muzakir Manaf, which emphasized Acehnese symbolism and Islamic values, proved to still have strong resonance among voters. His closeness to the *ulama* community and religious institutions reinforced an image of leadership grounded in morality, aligning with the symbiotic paradigm between politics and Islam. However, this study also highlights a shift in orientation among younger voters, who are increasingly rational and critical, demanding consistency between rhetoric and the implementation of concrete policies, rather than relying solely on historical narratives of struggle. Despite his success in managing conventional narratives, Muzakir Manaf's campaign team showed significant weakness in confronting the challenges of the digital age, particularly concerning disinformation and hoaxes. A response that tended to be non-confrontational has the potential to damage credibility in a fast-paced information ecosystem. A reflection from the perspective of Islamic politics also confirms that the greatest challenge for leadership in Aceh is how to apply principles such as *amanah* (trust) and justice substantively, while maintaining inclusivity and respecting the diversity of society.

Overall, this study affirms that future political success in Aceh will be heavily determined by a leader's ability to balance historical legacy, moral-religious legitimacy, and the demands of modernization. Muzakir Manaf's victory serves as an important case study demonstrating the complexity of post-conflict local politics, where strategic adaptation and a commitment to ethical principles are key to sustaining a healthy and inclusive democracy.

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