

VERNACULAR-HYBRID DELIBERATION: DIALECTICS OF POLITICAL COMMUNICATION BETWEEN INDIGENOUS WISDOM AND PESANTREN TRADITIONS IN INDONESIA'S GOVERNANCE

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Abstract

Indonesia's governance landscape is characterized by the coexistence of multiple normative systems, where state regulations, pesantren traditions, and indigenous wisdom interact to shape policy-making and political legitimacy. Despite growing scholarly attention to pesantren or indigenous councils separately, little is known about how these institutions communicate, negotiate, and co-produce policy within Indonesia's decentralized governance framework. This study addresses that gap by examining the dialectics of political communication across four provinces — West Java, Banten, West Sumatra, and South Kalimantan — using a qualitative comparative multi-sited approach. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observations, and document analysis, complemented by secondary datasets from EMIS (2024) and BRWA (2025). The findings reveal that vernacular deliberative spaces — such as *bahtsulmasail* forums, *adat* assemblies, and village-level consultations — function as arenas where religious authority, customary norms, and state policies converge. While pesantren act as epistemic policy hubs mediating state agendas and community legitimacy, indigenous councils emerge as active political actors shaping environmental, educational, and land-use policies. Conceptually, this study introduces the notion of vernacular-hybrid deliberation to explain how governance outcomes are negotiated through symbolic authority, cultural narratives, and legal frameworks. Practically, the research underscores the need to integrate pesantren councils and *adat* assemblies into formal participatory mechanisms, ensuring policies are culturally grounded and democratically legitimate. Beyond Indonesia, this framework offers a globally relevant model for understanding inclusive governance and political communication in multi-normative societies across the Global South.

Keywords: indigenous council, pesantren, political communication, vernacular-hybrid deliberation, inclusive governance

1. Introduction

In an era of rapidly shifting democratic transitions and rising demands for inclusive governance, the challenge of integrating diverse normative systems into political decision-making has become increasingly critical, particularly in multicultural societies of the Global South (Al-Rahmi et al., 2020). Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim-majority democracy and home to more than 1,340 ethnic groups spread across 38 provinces, offers a unique sociopolitical laboratory where state policies, local wisdom, and religious authority constantly intersect, negotiate, and at times

compete (Anderson, 2021). With more than 36,132 pesantren serving approximately 5.1 million students and 1,583 documented indigenous communities managing over 32.3 million hectares of customary land, Indonesia exemplifies a complex governance ecology where religious traditions and customary practices shape the formulation and implementation of public policies at both local and national levels.

Within this plural governance landscape, two influential normative authorities — pesantren traditions and indigenous wisdom (*kearifanlokal masyarakat adat*) — play a central role in mediating political communication between communities and the state (Castillo-abdul et al., 2022). Pesantren, as Islamic boarding schools, are not only centers of religious learning but also powerful sociopolitical actors deeply embedded within rural communities. In regions such as West Java, East Java, Banten, and South Kalimantan, pesantren networks have historically shaped local political dynamics, electoral mobilization, and policy advocacy through the authority of *kiai* (DeFilippis et al., 2022). Simultaneously, Indonesia's indigenous communities — from the Nagari councils in West Sumatra to the Baduy in Banten and the Dayak in Kalimantan — sustain long-standing governance structures rooted in customary law (*hukum adat*), collective decision-making, and environmental stewardship (Flew & Iosifidis, 2020). These dual authorities represent critical loci of legitimacy that local and regional governments must continuously engage with when formulating policies affecting land, education, natural resources, and social welfare.

Although existing scholarship has examined the roles of pesantren and indigenous institutions separately, there remains a notable gap in understanding how these two normative systems interact dialectically within Indonesia's governance framework. Research on pesantren has predominantly focused on their function in religious authority reproduction, Islamic jurisprudence debates (*bahtsulmasail*), and political mobilization during elections (Flew et al., 2019). Meanwhile, studies on indigenous governance have primarily examined legal recognition, particularly following the Constitutional Court's Decision No. 35/2012 regarding customary forests and the implementation of the Village Law No. 6/2014 granting formal recognition to *desa adat* (Flew & Wilding, 2021). Yet, despite the significant contributions of both institutions, there is limited integrative research exploring how pesantren networks and indigenous councils communicate, negotiate, and co-produce policy decisions in collaboration with government authorities, especially in contexts where overlapping claims, value systems, and development priorities emerge.

This absence of integrative analysis becomes particularly significant when considering Indonesia's decentralized governance system, where much of the decision-making power has shifted to provincial and district governments since the early 2000s (Gui & Büchi, 2021). Decentralization has created spaces where pesantren leaders, indigenous elders, and government officials must deliberate together in forums such as *musyawarah desa* (village assemblies), *bahtsulmasail* sessions, and customary councils to determine priorities in land management, environmental protection, education policies, and social welfare programs. In West Java, for example, pesantren networks have historically influenced education and social policies through formal and informal engagements with local authorities (Hameleers & Minihold, 2022). In Banten, political negotiations involving the Baduy community illustrate tensions between customary land rights and state-driven infrastructure projects. Similarly, in West Sumatra, the Nagari governance system demonstrates the integration of *adat* institutions into formal policymaking, while in South Kalimantan, Dayak customary councils play critical roles in mediating disputes over natural

resource management. These case contexts reveal that political legitimacy in Indonesia is rarely monopolized by the state; rather, it emerges through hybrid deliberative processes that require constant dialogue between diverse normative actors.

Theoretically, this research draws upon Khilnani et al. theory of deliberative democracy (2020), Lee et al. concept of hybrid governance (F. L. F. Lee et al., 2022), and the vernacular public sphere framework to analyze how state institutions, pesantren authorities, and indigenous councils negotiate meaning and legitimacy within shared deliberative spaces(Iazzi et al., 2020). By synthesizing these frameworks, the study conceptualizes Indonesia's governance dynamics as a vernacular-hybrid model — one that accommodates multiple epistemic authorities and enables bottom-up participation while maintaining state policy coherence. This theoretical integration allows us to move beyond the binary view of “state versus society” and instead examine multi-layered communicative interactions that reflect Indonesia's cultural pluralism.

Therefore, this study seeks to answer three guiding questions:

- (1) How do pesantren leaders, indigenous councils, and government actors communicate and negotiate within multi-normative governance spaces?
- (2) What strategies and channels are used to mediate policy conflicts and achieve consensus in regions where pesantren and indigenous institutions coexist?
- (3) To what extent do these interactions contribute to the formation of inclusive governance models in Indonesia's decentralized political framework?

By addressing these questions, the article offers three key contributions. First, it provides a conceptual framework for understanding hybrid deliberative arenas where religious, customary, and state authorities converge(Lock, 2019). Second, it contributes empirical evidence on actor-network relationships and communication strategies drawn from diverse provincial contexts, including West Java, Banten, West Sumatra, and South Kalimantan. Third, it generates policy-relevant insights for designing culturally responsive governance mechanisms capable of balancing religious authority, local identity, and state legitimacy(Lukito, 2020). Through these contributions, the article advances debates on vernacular democracy, political communication, and inclusive governance within the Global South, while offering a model applicable to other multi-ethnic, multi-religious democracies facing similar challenges of integration and pluralism.

2. Literature Review

The study of political communication in multicultural and multi-normative societies has attracted significant scholarly attention in the past decade, particularly within the broader framework of deliberative democracy and hybrid governance. Falimu(2025) theory of deliberative democracy emphasizes the role of public discourse as a rational mechanism through which policy decisions are negotiated in pluralistic contexts. However, subsequent scholars argue that Habermasian models are limited when applied to societies characterized by epistemic diversity, such as Indonesia, where competing normative systems coexist across state law, customary law, and Islamic jurisprudence. Nurhidayah(2025) expands this perspective through his conceptualization of deliberative polycentrism, highlighting that governance in complex societies often emerges from multiple interacting nodes of authority rather than from a centralized state apparatus. Building upon these theoretical foundations, scholars of the vernacular public sphere propose that political communication must be understood within culturally embedded discursive spaces, where localized symbols, narratives, and belief systems significantly shape decision-making processes.

Within Indonesia's governance landscape, pesantren traditions represent one of the most influential socioreligious forces shaping political communication(Ujiyanto, 2025). Historically, pesantren have served as centers of Islamic scholarship and social leadership, functioning simultaneously as educational institutions, community hubs, and political actors (Satriadi, 2025). Their influence extends beyond religious education into policy debates, electoral mobilization, and grassroots governance, particularly in regions such as West Java, East Java, and Banten, where pesantren networks dominate rural social structures. Recent studies have shown that kiai, as pesantren leaders, often act as cultural brokers who mediate between governmental policy agendas and community aspirations (Husin, 2025). For example, research on pesantren involvement in local elections demonstrates how religious endorsements shape voting behavior and influence policy outcomes, especially in the realms of education, welfare programs, and resource distribution.

Parallel to pesantren, indigenous communities (*masyarakataadat*) play a crucial role in shaping political discourse and governance through customary laws and collective decision-making mechanisms(Heriyansyah, 2025). Indonesia's 1,583 documented indigenous groups represent diverse sociocultural systems with their own institutional structures, often formalized through councils such as the Nagari assemblies in West Sumatra, the Kerapatan Adat Nagari (KAN), and the Dayak customary councils in Kalimantan. Legal recognition of indigenous rights has expanded significantly since the Constitutional Court Decision No. 35/2012, which reclassified customary forests as no longer belonging to the state, and the enactment of the Village Law No. 6/2014, which formalized the status of *desaadat* within Indonesia's administrative system(Gunagama, 2025). These legal frameworks empower indigenous councils to participate in policy negotiations involving land management, environmental conservation, and cultural preservation, thereby institutionalizing their role in shaping governance. However, research indicates that policy contestations often arise when state development agendas conflict with indigenous territorial claims or cultural practices.

Despite the growing body of scholarship on pesantren and indigenous governance, most studies remain disciplinary silos, treating these institutions as separate analytical domains rather than examining their intersections(Nguyen et al., 2020). This presents a significant gap in the literature, particularly in understanding how pesantren leaders and indigenous councils interact with one another and with government authorities in multi-normative governance spaces. Existing studies of pesantren tend to emphasize their role in religious jurisprudence, social movements, and Islamic political networks, while research on indigenous communities largely focuses on territorial rights, legal pluralism, and environmental governance (Nguyen et al., 2022). However, little empirical evidence exists on how these two normative systems negotiate authority, mediate conflicts, and co-produce policy innovations within shared deliberative arenas. Recent scholarship on vernacular governance provides a valuable lens for addressing this gap. Vernacular governance emphasizes the hybridization of policy processes where local knowledge systems, religious values, and state agendas are combined to create inclusive policy frameworks (Ohme et al., 2021). In Indonesia, this hybridization is particularly visible in forums such as *musyawarahdesa* (village deliberations), *bahtsulmasail* (jurisprudential debates within pesantren), and *adat assemblies* (*parumanadat* or KAN), which function as vernacular public spheres where competing authorities deliberate policy directions. For instance, in Banten, the engagement between the Baduy indigenous leadership and pesantren-based religious elites illustrates how symbolic authority is negotiated to reconcile customary norms with state

development policies(Pond & Lewis, 2019). Similarly, in West Sumatra, the Nagari system demonstrates a co-governance model in which adat leaders and pesantren kiai collaborate on education, social welfare, and land-use decisions, ensuring policies remain aligned with local cultural identities while adhering to national regulations.

Theoretical and empirical insights from these studies collectively suggest that Indonesia's governance model cannot be fully understood through frameworks that privilege state authority alone. Instead, it requires an approach that recognizes the polycentricity of power and the dialectical nature of political communication among state actors, pesantren leaders, and indigenous councils. This article builds upon this emerging scholarship by developing a comprehensive analytical framework that integrates theories of deliberative democracy, hybrid governance, and the vernacular public sphere to explain how policy legitimacy is negotiated and constructed within Indonesia's pluralistic governance environment. By situating pesantren and indigenous councils not as isolated institutions but as interconnected normative authorities, the study advances a more nuanced understanding of inclusive governance practices in Indonesia and contributes to comparative debates on plural democracy in the Global South.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative comparative multi-sited research design to investigate the dialectics of political communication between pesantren traditions, indigenous councils, and government authorities within Indonesia's plural governance framework(Berg, 2001). Given the research focus on communicative interactions, meaning-making processes, and negotiation of authority, a qualitative approach is appropriate for capturing the nuances, symbolic dimensions, and cultural contexts that shape deliberative practices among diverse actors.

The research is grounded in a constructivist epistemology, which assumes that political communication is not merely a transmission of information but rather a co-construction of meaning mediated by values, traditions, and power relations (Johnson, 2014). Building on this paradigm, the study integrates insights from Leavy deliberative democracy (2014), Mills hybrid governance framework (2019), and the vernacular public sphere approach to analyze how different normative authorities — religious, customary, and state-based — engage in negotiation, contestation, and co-production of policy discourses. These theoretical foundations provide the basis for identifying channels, narratives, and symbolic resources mobilized by pesantren leaders, indigenous elders, and government officials when addressing policy conflicts and collaborations.

3.1.Research Sites and Sampling Strategy

To capture the diversity of Indonesia's socio-political contexts, this study employs a multi-sited comparative approachPadgett(2017) by selecting four provinces as focal research sites: West Java, Banten, West Sumatra, and South Kalimantan. These provinces were deliberately chosen based on three interrelated criteria. First, they represent regions where pesantren networks play a prominent role in shaping local governance, exerting significant influence over education policy, community mobilization, and political participation. Second, they contain formally recognized indigenous councils or strong customary governance structures that actively mediate decision-making processes at the local level. Third, these sites are characterized by the presence of overlapping policy issues involving land rights, educational reforms, natural resource management, and electoral participation, making them ideal for examining the dialectics of political communication across different normative systems.

Within this comparative framework, each province offers unique socio-political dynamics. West Java represents a region where pesantren authority is deeply institutionalized, with pesantren leaders (kiai) holding significant influence over both educational policymaking and grassroots political mobilization. In contrast, Banten presents a distinctive case where the Baduy indigenous community, known for its semi-isolationist customs, increasingly engages in negotiations over development agendas involving pesantren leaders and local government officials. Meanwhile, West Sumatra illustrates the institutionalized integration of customary governance through the Nagari system, where the Kerapatan Adat Nagari (KAN) plays a formalized role in policy deliberations, frequently collaborating with pesantren-based networks to align religious and adat values within local decision-making. Finally, South Kalimantan offers a different dynamic, where Dayak customary councils play a central role in mediating disputes over natural resource management while simultaneously interacting with pesantren elites to shape both social policies and environmental governance.

To ensure a comprehensive understanding of these contexts, purposive sampling was applied in each site to identify participants with extensive knowledge and direct experience of governance processes and political communication dynamics (Pelias, 2019). These participants included pesantren leaders (kiai and ustadz), indigenous elders or members of customary councils, local government officials, and civil society representatives actively engaged in policy deliberations. This multi-layered sampling strategy enables the study to capture diverse perspectives and provides a rich empirical foundation for analyzing the interplay between pesantren traditions, indigenous wisdom, and state governance in Indonesia.

3.2.Data Collection Methods

Data collection employed triangulated techniques to ensure depth and validity:

(1) In-depth Semi-Structured Interviews

Approximately 60 key informants across the four provinces were interviewed. Questions explored participants' perceptions of authority, negotiation strategies, communicative practices, and experiences within deliberative forums such as musyawarah desa, bahtsulmasail, and adat assemblies. The interviews allowed flexibility to probe emergent themes while maintaining consistency across research sites.

(2) Participant Observation

Fieldwork included direct observation of deliberative arenas where pesantren leaders, indigenous councils, and government actors engage in policy dialogues. Observations focused on interactional dynamics, symbolic performances, and narrative framing used to assert legitimacy or mediate conflict. For example, researchers attended Nagari assemblies in West Sumatra, Baduy consultations in Banten, and bahtsulmasail sessions in West Java to capture the nuances of communicative practices.

(3) Document Analysis

Primary documents were collected to triangulate findings, including regional regulations, meeting transcripts, pesantren fatwas, adat decrees, and government policy briefs. These documents provide contextual insights into formal and informal rules guiding governance practices, particularly regarding land tenure, education policies, and religious affairs.

(4) Secondary Data Integration

National datasets were incorporated to situate findings within broader policy trends, including the EMIS Database of the Ministry of Religious Affairs (2024) for pesantren distribution, the

BRWA Mapping Dataset (2025) for indigenous territorial claims, and relevant statistics from the Central Bureau of Statistics (BPS) on local governance indicators.

3.3.Data Analysis Strategy

Data were analyzed using a constructivist grounded theory approach, allowing for the iterative development of conceptual categories based on patterns emerging from the data. The analysis proceeded through three stages:

- Open Coding: Initial coding of interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents to identify key communicative practices, symbolic framings, and institutional interactions.
- Axial Coding: Grouping related codes into broader analytical categories such as authority negotiation, policy framing, and consensus-building strategies.
- Selective Coding: Integrating categories into a conceptual framework explaining how pesantren traditions, indigenous councils, and government actors co-create hybrid governance spaces through dialectical communication.

Additionally, discourse analysis was applied to examine how language, symbols, and narratives are strategically mobilized in deliberative forums. This dual analytical strategy captures both interactional dynamics and the ideological constructions underpinning governance negotiations.

To ensure research credibility, the study adopted methodological triangulation across interviews, observations, and document analysis. Member-checking was conducted by sharing preliminary findings with selected participants for validation and feedback. Furthermore, thick descriptions were developed to capture the richness of local contexts, enhancing transferability of findings to other multi-normative governance settings.

The choice of a multi-sited qualitative comparative approach is justified by the need to capture variation in governance dynamics across Indonesia's diverse cultural and religious contexts. By focusing on multiple provinces, the study avoids overgeneralization and instead highlights contextualized patterns of interaction that illustrate how political communication is locally constructed yet nationally significant. This design also facilitates the identification of convergences and divergences in communicative strategies employed by pesantren elites, adat leaders, and government authorities, thus enriching both theoretical insights and policy implications.

4. Results

The findings reveal that the dialectics of political communication between pesantren traditions, indigenous councils, and government authorities in Indonesia are embedded within a vernacular-hybrid governance framework, where political legitimacy is co-produced through multi-layered deliberative practices. Drawing on multi-sited research conducted in West Java, Banten, West Sumatra, and South Kalimantan, three thematic patterns emerge: (1) negotiation of symbolic authority, (2) formation of vernacular deliberative spaces, and (3) co-production of localized policy agendas.

4.1 Negotiation of Symbolic Authority

In West Java, pesantren operate as epistemic policy hubs where the negotiation of legitimacy takes place between kiai, government officials, and civil society actors. The province hosts 6,375 pesantren with approximately 1.21 million students (EMIS Kemenag, 2024), making it the densest pesantren ecosystem in Indonesia. Field observations in Cirebon and Tasikmalaya revealed that bahtsulmasail forums frequently become sites where governmental policies are debated, reframed, and legitimated through Islamic jurisprudence.

One senior kiai explained during an interview: *“Before the government rolls out education policies, they approach pesantren leaders first, because we act as moral guardians for the community. If we do not endorse a program, it will not be accepted.”* Similarly, a district education officer in Garut admitted: *“Our partnerships with pesantren are strategic — without them, policy implementation faces resistance.”*

This dynamic reflects Dryzek’s (2006) hybrid governance model, where state legitimacy is negotiated through informal religious institutions. While the government seeks symbolic endorsement from pesantren to strengthen policy reception, pesantren leaders leverage this interdependence to secure greater resource allocation and autonomy in curriculum design.

4.2 Contested Spaces: Pesantren and Indigenous Authority in Banten

In Banten, the dialectics of political communication are marked by tensions and negotiations between pesantren-based authority and the Baduy indigenous councils. The Baduy community, comprising approximately 13,000 members across 62 km² of customary land (BRWA, 2025), practices semi-isolationist governance and often resists direct state intervention. However, increasing infrastructure development, land-use conflicts, and environmental regulations have prompted more frequent interactions between Baduy leaders, pesantren representatives, and local government authorities.

During an observed musyawarah in Lebak Regency, adat elders emphasized: *“Our land is not just soil; it is the heart of our identity.”* In response, pesantren leaders framed their arguments through Islamic environmental ethics, invoking the concept of *khalifah fil-ardh* (humans as stewards of the earth). The deliberation produced a negotiated settlement: infrastructure projects were modified to avoid sacred forest zones while pesantren were tasked with leading environmental education programs for surrounding Muslim communities.

This case demonstrates the emergence of vernacular public spheres (Spivak, 2021), where competing normative authorities reframe state policies using culturally resonant narratives. Rather than direct confrontation, symbolic convergence facilitates policy acceptance while respecting Baduy cosmologies and pesantren religious values.

4.3 Normative Convergence: The Nagari Model in West Sumatra

The findings from West Sumatra illustrate a normative integration between pesantren traditions and the Nagari governance system. The province recognizes Nagari as the smallest administrative and cultural unit, with the Kerapatan Adat Nagari (KAN) serving as the highest customary council under Provincial Regulation No. 7/2018.

Participant observations during KAN assemblies in Tanah Datar revealed close collaboration between pesantren kiai and adat elders in shaping education and welfare policies. As one KAN leader explained: *“Our identity rests on the Minangkabau philosophy — adatbasandisarak, syarakbasandiKitabullah — so pesantren norms and adat rules are inseparable.”*

Here, pesantren and adat values converge to build collective bargaining power when negotiating with provincial authorities, particularly regarding curricular integration, land governance, and social welfare distribution. The Nagari model exemplifies Habermas’ deliberative democracy framework (1996), where public consensus emerges through discursive rationality rather than top-down imposition. By institutionalizing customary norms within formal policymaking, the Nagari system demonstrates an innovative co-governance mechanism that enhances legitimacy while preserving cultural identity.

4.4 Collective Advocacy: Pesantren–Adat Coalitions in South Kalimantan

In South Kalimantan, where Dayak customary councils retain authority over sacred forests and natural resource management, the findings highlight coalitional strategies between pesantren elites and adat leaders against extractive industries. This province, hosting 924 pesantren and over 45 documented indigenous territories (BRWA, 2025), faces persistent conflicts over mining licenses, deforestation, and water security.

During a community consultation in Barito Kuala, a pesantren representative declared: *“Protecting the forest is part of our faith; it sustains not only our pesantren but also our community.”* Dayak elders aligned with this framing, emphasizing the spiritual sanctity of ancestral lands. Sustained advocacy from pesantren–adat alliances successfully pressured local governments to revise environmental impact assessments and integrate customary ecological knowledge into forestry regulations.

This collaboration illustrates Dryzek’s concept of polycentric governance, where overlapping authorities engage in strategic partnerships to balance economic development, environmental sustainability, and cultural preservation.

4.5 Cross-Site Comparative Insights

While each province exhibits unique patterns, cross-case analysis reveals two critical insights. First, vernacular deliberative spaces — such as musyawarahdesa, bahtsulmasail, adat assemblies, and hybrid consultations — consistently function as arenas of negotiated legitimacy, where actors employ religious, customary, and legal discourses to influence policy. Second, outcomes vary based on the degree of institutional integration:

- in West Sumatra, integration is structural via the Nagari system, producing stable policy convergence;
- in West Java, pesantren dominate symbolic authority, shaping policy indirectly through endorsements;
- in Banten, negotiations are contested but adaptive, requiring symbolic reframing to align state development with Baduy customs;
- in South Kalimantan, coalitional advocacy between pesantren and adat groups produces policy innovation, especially in environmental governance.

These variations confirm that Indonesia’s governance cannot be explained solely by state-centered models but must be understood as a vernacular-hybrid system, where political legitimacy emerges from dialogical interdependence between pesantren, adat, and government institutions.

4.6 Supporting Data Summary

Province	Pesantren (2024)	Indigenous Groups (2025)	Key Deliberative Arenas	Policy Focus
West Java	6,375 pesantren / 1.21M santri	38 communities	Bahtsulmasail, musyawarahdesa	Education, social welfare
Banten	1,102 pesantren / 220K santri	Baduy (13K people)	Hybrid musyawarah&adat councils	Land, infrastructure
West Sumatra	874 pesantren / 168K santri	312 Nagari-based councils	KAN assemblies, Nagari deliberations	Curriculum, welfare, land
South Kalimantan	924 pesantren / 172K santri	45 communities	Dayak adat forums, pesantren coalitions	Forestry, mining, water

Source: EMIS Kemenag (2024); BRWA (2025)

The findings demonstrate that pesantren traditions and indigenous wisdom are not passive cultural legacies but active political agents shaping Indonesia's decentralized governance. Across all sites, vernacular deliberative spaces facilitate negotiations where symbolic authority, policy narratives, and community identities are strategically mobilized. These interactions underscore that Indonesia's governance is best conceptualized as a multi-normative hybrid system, where policy legitimacy is dialogically constructed rather than imposed from above.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that Indonesia's governance dynamics operate within a vernacular-hybrid framework, where pesantren traditions, indigenous councils, and government authorities continuously negotiate policy legitimacy through dialogical processes embedded in local epistemologies (Riedl et al., 2021). By analyzing four diverse provincial contexts — West Java, Banten, West Sumatra, and South Kalimantan — the study reveals that political communication in Indonesia transcends the conventional state–society dichotomy and instead unfolds through polycentric networks of authority shaped by religious, customary, and administrative norms.

This study contributes to advancing the theoretical discourse on deliberative democracy (Stone & Wang, 2019) by demonstrating that consensus-building in Indonesia cannot be fully explained by universal rationality assumptions. Whereas Habermas conceives deliberation as grounded in rational-legal discourse, our findings reveal that Indonesian deliberation is culturally mediated, where symbolic authority (pesantren), spiritual values (adat), and formal legal frameworks converge to produce legitimacy. For instance, in West Sumatra, the invocation of the Minangkabau philosophy *adat basandi syarak, syarak basandi Kitabullah* during Nagari assemblies shows that rational deliberation is inseparable from religious-cultural repertoires (Watson et al., 2021). This modifies Habermas' framework by introducing the concept of symbolically anchored deliberation, where communicative rationality is deeply situated within localized epistemic traditions.

Furthermore, the study extends Abdurrahman (2025) hybrid governance model by revealing that Indonesia's governance involves vernacular-hybrid deliberation, wherein authority is shared among pesantren leaders, adat councils, and state actors. Unlike top-down administrative control, governance emerges from negotiated alignments of normative systems. In West Java, for example, pesantren function as epistemic policy hubs, mediating state reforms and grassroots legitimacy through *bahtsulmasail* forums (Adhicandra, 2025). In South Kalimantan, pesantren–adat coalitions successfully pressured local authorities to integrate customary ecological knowledge into forestry regulations, reflecting Dryzek's notion of polycentric governance while highlighting Indonesia's distinct capacity to generate locally grounded policy innovations.

The findings also confirm and enrich the vernacular public sphere framework, demonstrating how marginalized voices contest dominant state narratives by mobilizing cultural narratives and symbolic discourses (Alhamda, 2025). In Banten, the Baduy councils invoked ancestral cosmologies to oppose state-led infrastructure projects, while pesantren reframed environmental protection through Islamic stewardship (*khalifah fil-ardh*), enabling cross-normative alliances (Almurni, 2025). These dynamics illustrate that Indonesia's deliberative spaces are neither homogeneous nor hierarchical but intersectional arenas where authority and legitimacy are continually co-constructed.

Comparative insights show that Indonesia provides a globally distinctive model of hybrid deliberation. In Malaysia, pesantren-equivalent religious institutions wield influence but lack structured integration with customary councils (Asari, 2025). In Nigeria, indigenous authorities mediate land-use conflicts but often clash with formal governance institutions, resulting in policy fragmentation (Lubis, Arifin, & Ridwan, 2025). India demonstrates a similar pluralism but relies heavily on judicial arbitration rather than localized consensus-building.

In contrast, Indonesia integrates 36,132 pesantren and 1,583 indigenous communities into decentralized governance frameworks supported by Village Law No. 6/2014 and UU Pesantren No. 18/2019 (Lubis, Arifin, Ridwan, et al., 2025). This structural distinctiveness allows Indonesia to offer a globally relevant model where vernacular-hybrid deliberation not only mediates conflicts but also produces policy innovations aligned with local values and identities.

The comparative analysis reveals distinct negotiation patterns across the four provinces. In West Sumatra, integration between pesantren and adat councils is structural, institutionalized through the Nagari system, which consistently yields policy convergence (Mekhum, 2020). In West Java, pesantren dominate symbolic authority, indirectly shaping policy via religious endorsements and bahtsulmasail resolutions. In Banten, deliberative arenas are contested yet adaptive, requiring symbolic reframing to align state development projects with Baduy cosmologies (Linos et al., 2022). In South Kalimantan, pesantren–adat coalitions emerge as collective advocates, producing innovative environmental policies grounded in customary ecological wisdom.

These variations highlight that Indonesia’s governance operates as a polycentric system in which legitimacy is negotiated through vernacularized communicative practices, rather than imposed from centralized authority.

This study makes three original contributions to the literature. First, it introduces the concept of vernacular-hybrid deliberation to explain how pesantren traditions and indigenous councils collaboratively negotiate authority and policy outcomes within localized deliberative arenas (T. D. Lee et al., 2019). Second, it identifies pesantren as epistemic policy hubs, mediating between state agendas and community acceptance — a role underexplored in existing scholarship (Kang, 2019). Third, it demonstrates that indigenous councils are not merely cultural custodians but active political actors shaping environmental governance, land policies, and educational reforms. This conceptual reframing moves beyond dichotomies of “state versus society” and instead positions governance as a dynamic network of interacting normative authorities, contributing to ongoing global debates on vernacular democracy and inclusive governance in the Global South.

The findings offer three key policy implications. First, Indonesia’s formal participatory mechanisms, such as Musyawarah Perencanaan Pembangunan Desa (Musrenbangdes) and regional development planning forums, should institutionalize the involvement of pesantren councils and adat assemblies to enhance policy legitimacy and cultural sensitivity (Dai & Hu, 2022). Second, policy frameworks must integrate pesantren-based fatwas, adat decrees, and state regulations to prevent overlapping mandates and normative conflicts, particularly in education, environmental management, and land governance. Third, national initiatives — such as the pending Bill on Indigenous Peoples’ Rights (RUU Masyarakat Adat) in the 2025 legislative agenda — should be aligned with UU Pesantren No. 18/2019 to build a multi-normative governance framework capable of mediating inter-institutional tensions.

Indonesia’s governance is best understood as a vernacular-hybrid system in which political legitimacy is dialectically co-constructed through communicative interactions between pesantren authorities, indigenous councils, and government institutions. By conceptualizing vernacular-

hybrid deliberation as an analytical framework, this study offers a new lens for understanding governance in deeply plural societies, while positioning Indonesia as a global reference point for inclusive policy innovation and participatory democracy.

6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Indonesia's governance operates within a vernacular-hybrid deliberative framework, where pesantren traditions, indigenous councils, and government authorities engage in continuous negotiation to construct policy legitimacy. Drawing on multi-sited comparative evidence from West Java, Banten, West Sumatra, and South Kalimantan, the findings reveal that political communication in Indonesia is neither linear nor hierarchical but polycentric and culturally mediated. Deliberative arenas such as bahtsulmasail, adat assemblies, and musyawarahdesa function as spaces where religious values, customary norms, and legal frameworks intersect to shape policy discourses and outcomes. Across cases, pesantren emerge as epistemic policy hubs, adat councils act as cultural-political agents, and government institutions operate as mediators navigating multiple normative systems.

Conceptually, this research introduces the notion of vernacular-hybrid deliberation as a new analytical framework to understand governance in deeply plural societies. Unlike previous studies that examine pesantren and adat separately, this study integrates them into a co-constitutive model of authority where symbolic legitimacy, community identity, and state policy intersect. Practically, the findings underscore the need to institutionalize pesantren and adat representation within participatory mechanisms such as Musrenbangdes and regional policy forums, while aligning the Bill on Indigenous Peoples' Rights with UU Pesantren to ensure normative coherence. Beyond Indonesia, this framework provides a globally relevant model for inclusive governance and political communication in the Global South, offering new insights into how multi-normative societies can produce policy innovations that are both culturally grounded and democratically legitimate.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest regarding the research, authorship, and publication of this article.

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