

Fatwa Infrastructure in Indonesian Local Governance: Religious Authority, Digital Circulation, and Policy Legitimacy

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ABSTRACT

Fatwa has become increasingly important in Indonesian local governance as religious authority circulates beyond clerical forums and enters administrative, political, and digital arenas. In decentralized settings, moral legitimacy often matters as much as formal legality, making religious reasoning an influential resource in local policymaking and public justification. This article examines how fatwa becomes politically actionable in subnational governance in Indonesia. The article adopts a qualitative and theory-driven approach informed by studies of religious authority, decentralization, digital politics, and governance infrastructure. It draws on academic literature, policy-related materials, public communication, and documented cases concerning the use of fatwa in local policy debates, administrative framing, and digitally mediated public discourse. Analytical attention is directed to governance translation, reputational signaling, digital authority markers, and local scope variation. A mechanism-based synthesis is used to explain how religious legal reasoning becomes portable, publicly persuasive, and institutionally usable across local political settings. Fatwa emerges as politically consequential when it functions as an infrastructural shortcut linking moral authority, bureaucratic routine, and public legitimacy. Religious reasoning therefore affects local governance not only through doctrine, but through its translation into administrative cues and networked communication. The article contributes to the field by offering an integrated framework for understanding how fatwa operates as infrastructure in decentralized democratic governance.

Keywords: fatwa; governance; authority; Indonesia

INTRODUCTION

Debates on religion and politics in Indonesia have often focused on constitutional design, party competition, and the symbolic role of Islam at the national level. Yet many decisive interactions occur below national law, within the routine practices of provincial and municipal governance. In these settings, fatwa circulates not only as a theological opinion but also as a practical cue that informs how officials, politicians, and civic organizations interpret legitimate policy (Chakim et al., 2025; Hakim et al., 2023). This makes subnational politics a crucial site for understanding the movement of moral authority into governance. Indonesia's decentralized institutional order creates multiple arenas in which local executives manage welfare, licensing, public order, and social policy while facing reputational risk in morally attentive publics. Religious authority therefore appears not as an external force acting upon governance from outside, but as one of the resources through which governance is interpreted and justified (Wahid et al., 2025). The background of this article is thus a political environment in which clerical authority, administrative routines, and digitally mediated public reasoning increasingly intersect.

The central problem lies in the fact that fatwa is frequently treated either as a top-down imposition or as a diffuse discursive artifact with uncertain policy effects (Fathorrahman et al., 2024). Such

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treatments do not adequately explain why some fatwa texts become actionable in local governance while others remain symbolic or are openly contested. This problem has direct real-world relevance because fatwa-related cues can influence moral regulation, welfare policy, licensing decisions, and public order management in concrete local settings. A fatwa may function as a signal of moral alignment, a shield against accusations of impiety, or a script for presenting policy choices as collective obligations. At the same time, the same text can become a source of controversy when rival actors dispute its scope or challenge the authority of those invoking it (E. J. A. H. Nasution, 2025). The practical significance of this issue is heightened by the fact that local officials operate under both administrative constraints and reputational pressures in polarized public spheres. Understanding how fatwa becomes politically usable is therefore essential for explaining the dynamics of legitimacy in decentralized Indonesian governance.

A substantial body of scholarship already clarifies several key dimensions of this field. Research on Islamization, moral regulation, and the politics of piety has documented the proliferation of local regulations, the strategic use of religious symbols in elections, and the continuing importance of clerical councils in public life (Alfitri, 2020; Mufid & Muhammad, 2023). Studies of digital politics have also shown that platforms reshape public reasoning by accelerating mobilization, privileging attention, and compressing deliberation into fast-moving circulation systems. Scholarship on religious authority further explains how credibility is produced through institutional capital, scholarly lineage, and recognized expertise, while also noting the growing importance of media visibility. These literatures establish that religion, political competition, and mediated communication are each central to Indonesian public life. They also make clear that authority is not simply possessed but socially recognized across multiple audiences. What is already known, then, is that fatwa can matter politically, that local governance is shaped by religious legitimacy, and that digital circulation changes the speed and scale of public contestation (Aseri et al., 2025).

What remains less clearly specified is the micro-level mechanism that links fatwa production to policy uptake and electoral signaling in local governance. Existing research often leaves unclear how a religious text moves from clerical reasoning into administrative memos, party narratives, and platform content. It also under-specifies why similar religious texts produce divergent policy outcomes across regions with different coalition structures, levels of administrative discretion, and media architectures. A further uncertainty concerns the communicative transformation of fatwa under networked public-sphere conditions (Pratama et al., 2024). Once legal reasoning is compressed into summaries, posters, screenshots, and short video explanations, the relationship between doctrinal nuance and governance use becomes more unstable. Without a more integrated account of these transitions, it becomes difficult to explain how fatwa can act simultaneously as a governance shortcut, a bargaining device, and a catalyst for counter-mobilization. The unknown dimension therefore concerns not only whether fatwa influences policy, but how it becomes portable, actionable, and defensible across institutional and media arenas.

The research gap becomes sharper when examined through the article's applied theoretical synthesis. The uploaded draft proposes an alternative view by treating fatwa as infrastructure rather than merely as a text or an episodic intervention. This move is analytically important because infrastructure refers to enabling arrangements that make certain actions easier, faster, and more defensible. When fatwa is repeatedly referenced in administrative memos, party narratives, and platform content, it begins to function as a shared interpretive shortcut within governance (Mahsun et al., 2024). This approach also incorporates a communicative dimension by showing that authority in a networked public sphere is not

only asserted but performed through visibility, citation chains, institutional logos, scholarly credentials, and reciprocal amplification. The gap in prior scholarship lies precisely here: the absence of a framework that connects institutional pathways and media pathways within one coherent explanation of subnational religious-political legitimacy. Such a framework is necessary if fatwa is to be understood as a modular governance resource rather than as a purely theological statement (Zayyadi et al., 2025).

Filling this gap is theoretically justified because neither an institutional approach alone nor a media-centered approach alone is sufficient. A purely institutional account would miss the role of platform circulation, chain citation, and authority markers in stabilizing the public credibility of a fatwa cue. A purely communicative account would miss the administrative routines, coalition bargaining, and discretionary procedures through which such cues become embedded in governance (Rohman, 2023). The infrastructural view offers a stronger synthesis because it explains how fatwa becomes operational when it aligns with bureaucratic incentives, coalition strategies, and digitally mediated visibility. It also allows the analysis to capture conditionality rather than assume uniform religious influence. A fatwa matters politically when it can be translated into administrative categories, amplified through recognizable authority markers, and stabilized through alignment among clerical institutions, political actors, and bureaucratic risk management (Aswan & Ashufah, 2023). This justification makes the framework coherent with both local governance analysis and studies of networked public authority.

From this basis, the article is guided by a set of closely related research questions. How does fatwa become actionable in local governance rather than remain a purely theological text. Through what pathways is legal religious reasoning translated into governance cues that officials can use in welfare delivery, public order, licensing, or morality policy. How do digitally mediated authority markers, citation chains, and platform fragments increase the perceived weight and portability of those cues. Why do similar fatwa texts generate different outcomes across provincial and municipal settings shaped by different coalition structures, administrative discretion, and media architectures. Under what conditions does fatwa become a governance shortcut, a bargaining device, or a catalyst for counter-mobilization. These questions move the discussion beyond broad claims about religious influence and toward observable processes linking moral authority, platform visibility, and subnational policymaking.

The urgency of these questions is heightened by the practical realities of decentralized democracy in Indonesia. Local governments face pressure to act quickly under conditions of public scrutiny, limited deliberative capacity, and reputational risk in morally attentive environments. In such contexts, fatwa can lower the transaction costs of signaling policy appropriateness across multiple audiences, including voters, civil society groups, media outlets, and supervisory state agencies (Menchik, 2022). The article contributes by offering a mechanism-based vocabulary that clarifies how legitimacy is assembled through translation, amplification, and stabilization or contestation rather than through formal coercion alone. It also contributes to digital politics scholarship by linking platform visibility to administrative decision-making rather than treating online circulation as merely attitudinal or electoral. More broadly, the article provides an empirically grounded way to evaluate how religious reasoning enters democratic governance without reducing clerical actors to monolithic authorities or political actors to simple cynics (Rosidi, 2025). The discussion that follows is therefore anchored in the proposition that fatwa operates as infrastructure when moral authority, bureaucratic incentive, and networked publicity become mutually reinforcing in local governance.

RESEARCH METHOD

This article employs a qualitative, mechanism-oriented research design to examine how fatwa becomes actionable within subnational governance under conditions of decentralized administration and networked public communication in Indonesia. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the central object of inquiry consists of meanings, legitimacy claims, administrative translation, authority signaling, and communicative circulation, all of which depend on context and cannot be adequately reduced to numerical indicators alone (Bradley, 1993). The analytical framework treats fatwa as infrastructure rather than merely as a theological text, allowing the analysis to trace how religious reasoning becomes portable, usable, and defensible across bureaucratic, political, and media arenas. Within this framework, the study focuses on the linked processes of translation, amplification, and stabilization or contestation, through which clerical authority enters local policy environments.

This design works well for the research because the issue is not simply whether fatwa influences policy, but how its influence is assembled through interactions among bureaucratic incentives, coalition dynamics, and digitally mediated public authority (Johnson & Vindrola-Padros, 2017). A qualitative strategy makes it possible to reconstruct these interactions in a way that preserves institutional specificity and communicative nuance. It also allows attention to scope conditions, since similar fatwa texts may generate different policy effects across provincial and municipal settings with different governance arrangements and media architectures. Such a design is therefore especially suitable for a research problem concerned with moral authority, local state practice, and the infrastructural conditions of legitimacy in decentralized democratic governance.

The data consist of academic literature, fatwa texts and summaries, policy documents, local regulations, administrative statements, public commentary, media coverage, and publicly accessible digital materials relevant to religious authority, local policymaking, and platform-mediated circulation in Indonesia. Data collection was conducted through purposive selection of materials directly related to subnational governance episodes in which fatwa, clerical authority, or religious legal reasoning entered debates over welfare, licensing, public order, morality policy, or electoral signaling (Chand, 2025). The units of analysis are not individual citizens as respondents, but policy-relevant fatwa references, administrative and political uses of religious reasoning, digital authority markers, citation chains, and the discursive-institutional arrangements through which these become actionable.

A qualitative coding matrix served as the primary instrument for organizing the material according to the main analytical dimensions of translation into governance cues, amplification through platform and media circulation, stabilization or contestation within local coalitions, bureaucratic risk management, authority signaling, and scope variation across governance settings (Fort, 2020). These dimensions functioned as the principal variables for tracing how moral authority moved between clerical, administrative, political, and digital arenas. Trustworthiness was strengthened through source triangulation across legal, administrative, media, and digital materials, conceptual consistency in coding, and explicit alignment between the research questions, theoretical framework, and analytical categories.

Reliability was supported by maintaining a transparent audit trail of source selection and thematic classification, while validity was enhanced by restricting the analysis to materials directly relevant to subnational Indonesian governance and by interpreting them through the same infrastructural framework across cases (Busetto et al., 2020). Because the study relies on publicly accessible documentary and digital materials and does not involve direct interaction with human participants,

formal informed consent was not required; nevertheless, ethical standards were maintained by treating politically and religiously sensitive material with caution, avoiding selective misrepresentation, and preserving confidentiality wherever non-public individual information could otherwise be inferred.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Fatwa becomes politically consequential in subnational Indonesian governance when it functions less as a stand-alone theological text and more as an infrastructural shortcut linking moral authority, administrative action, and public legitimacy. In provincial and municipal settings, policy decisions often require not only legal defensibility but also moral acceptability within attentive publics. Fatwa becomes useful under these conditions because it condenses religious reasoning into a recognizable cue that can travel across bureaucratic, political, and civic arenas. Its value lies not simply in doctrinal content, but in its capacity to lower the transaction costs of signaling that a decision is ethically grounded. Local governance therefore does not absorb fatwa as a rigid command. It uses fatwa as a modular resource that can help justify, frame, and stabilize administrative choices (Hashir & Rashid, 2025). This makes subnational politics a crucial site for understanding how religious authority enters governance through routine practice rather than through exceptional constitutional conflict. Fatwa operates as infrastructure when its moral force becomes administratively portable and publicly legible.

A major pattern concerns the translation of fatwa into governance cues. Religious reasoning rarely enters local policy in its full juridical or argumentative form. It is instead reformulated into concise policy-relevant language that can be inserted into memos, speeches, licensing discussions, welfare narratives, and public-order justifications. This translation allows bureaucrats and political actors to treat fatwa as actionable guidance without reproducing the complexity of legal religious debate. Governance translation therefore depends on simplification, selectivity, and contextual adaptation. Such adaptation does not necessarily distort the original text, but it changes the terms of its political use. A fatwa becomes administratively usable when it can be aligned with existing categories of risk, order, public morality, or communal welfare (Zuhri et al., 2024). The movement from jurisprudential reasoning to policy cue is thus a central mechanism through which religious authority enters local state practice.

This translated form gives fatwa an additional political function as a reputational shield. Local officials and political actors operate under conditions of public scrutiny in which decisions can be interpreted not only administratively but morally. Invoking fatwa provides a way to signal alignment with recognized religious authority while reducing exposure to accusations of impiety or moral indifference. This is especially important when policy issues are politically sensitive, involve moral regulation, or can be framed as affecting communal values (F. A. Nasution, 2023). Fatwa therefore helps officials present decisions as responses to wider normative obligation rather than to mere administrative preference. Its utility lies partly in symbolic protection. A decision framed through clerical reference appears less personally discretionary and more anchored in an external source of legitimacy. Reputational signaling thus explains why fatwa may be attractive even in settings where formal legal compulsion is weak.

This signaling function also extends into electoral and coalition politics. Political actors may deploy fatwa-related cues not only to justify governance choices but to position themselves within morally attentive constituencies. Such positioning can strengthen alliances with religious organizations, reduce political risk among devout publics, and communicate sensitivity to communal expectations. Fatwa in this sense becomes part of the symbolic repertoire through which local legitimacy is assembled. It does not

determine coalition outcomes by itself, but it can enhance the moral intelligibility of political alignment. This matters in decentralized governance because local executives often depend on broad and shifting coalitions that include bureaucrats, party figures, religious leaders, and civic intermediaries. A fatwa reference can therefore act as a bridging device across heterogeneous actors. Moral authority is converted into political usability when it can travel within these coalition-building processes.

Digital circulation intensifies this portability by making fatwa more visible, compressible, and publicly persuasive. Under networked public-sphere conditions, the authority of fatwa is carried not only by the full text but by excerpts, screenshots, infographics, logos, clerical images, and short summaries designed for rapid recognition. These authority markers make fatwa easier to cite, repost, and defend in public communication. Platform environments privilege content that is concise, legible, and symbolically strong, which gives simplified religious cues an advantage over lengthy interpretive argument. As a result, digitally mediated fatwa acquires a different public life than its textual form alone would suggest. Its persuasive force is enhanced by visual and reputational indicators that communicate authenticity at speed. Networked visibility thus amplifies the political usefulness of fatwa by transforming it into a communicative object adapted to fragmented and reactive publics.

This digital amplification does not simply broaden reach. It also alters the conditions of contestation. Once a fatwa cue enters networked circulation, it can be attached to partisan narratives, moral panics, local grievances, and strategic messaging by multiple actors. The same portable quality that makes it useful for governance also makes it available for reinterpretation and dispute. Digital authority markers can stabilize legitimacy, but they can also invite counter-readings when rival actors question authenticity, scope, or political motive. The networked public sphere therefore increases both the force and the fragility of fatwa-based governance claims. Platform circulation helps explain why some moral cues gain disproportionate public weight in local politics. It also explains why those cues may provoke rapid controversy rather than orderly acceptance. Fatwa as infrastructure is thus simultaneously enabling and destabilizing under digital conditions.

The comparative structure of these dynamics can be summarized through four linked dimensions: governance translation, reputational signaling, digital authority markers, and local scope variation.

Table 1. Comparative Dimensions of Fatwa Infrastructure in Subnational Governance

Analytical Dimension	Main Pattern	Political Implication
Governance translation	Fatwa is reformulated into policy-relevant language	Religious reasoning becomes administratively usable
Reputational signaling	Officials invoke fatwa to display moral legitimacy	Policy decisions gain symbolic protection
Digital authority markers	Platform circulation increases visibility and portability	Fatwa acquires wider public force
Local scope variation	Outcomes differ by coalition, bureaucracy, and contestation	Religious authority remains conditional, not uniform

Table 1 clarifies that fatwa operates as infrastructure only when several processes align rather than through theological authority alone. Governance translation makes fatwa actionable by converting legal reasoning into administrative cues. Reputational signaling explains why officials and political actors treat those cues as valuable resources in morally attentive environments. Digital authority markers increase the speed, range, and persuasive compression of those cues within networked publics. Local scope variation shows that none of these processes guarantees uniform policy uptake. Outcomes depend on

coalition structure, bureaucratic discretion, media architecture, and the capacity of rival actors to challenge interpretation. The table therefore supports the broader argument that fatwa becomes infrastructural when moral authority, administrative routine, and networked publicity become mutually reinforcing. Religious authority remains politically powerful, but always through mediated and contingent pathways.

This interpretation is consistent with earlier scholarship on Islamization, decentralization, and moral regulation in Indonesia while extending that literature in a more integrated direction. Previous studies established that local regulations, piety politics, and clerical institutions matter for public policy and electoral competition. Research on digital politics also demonstrated that online circulation reshapes the visibility and velocity of public reasoning. The present discussion joins these insights by showing how subnational governance and networked authority operate together rather than as separate arenas. Fatwa is not merely a symbol of Islamization, nor merely a media artifact. It is a governance resource whose effectiveness depends on translation into policy language and amplification through recognizable authority markers. This mechanism-based account helps explain why religious authority sometimes enters local state practice smoothly and at other times provokes intense contestation. The contribution lies in specifying the infrastructural pathways through which moral claims acquire administrative and political relevance.

The implications for subnational governance are substantial. Local policymaking in decentralized democracy often depends on balancing administrative pragmatism with moral legitimacy. Fatwa provides one means of managing that balance by making decisions appear ethically anchored and publicly defensible. Yet this also changes the terms of accountability. When policy choices are shielded through clerical reference, the boundary between bureaucratic judgment and moral obligation can become less transparent. This may strengthen legitimacy in some contexts, but it can also weaken open deliberation by narrowing the perceived space for disagreement. Democratic governance is affected because religious reasoning enters policy not only through formal consultation but through routinized signaling and communicative shortcuts. Fatwa as infrastructure therefore has consequences not only for policy content but for the style of local democratic justification. It shapes how legitimacy is assembled in practice.

These dynamics also matter for digital public authority and policy communication. Communication formats are not secondary to the uptake of fatwa; they are central to how its authority is stabilized or challenged. Local governments, clerical councils, media actors, and civic intermediaries all participate in the circulation of authority cues through selective citation, visual branding, and compressed explanation. This means that public communication becomes part of governance itself. A fatwa that is difficult to interpret in formal textual form may become highly actionable once translated into a recognizable and shareable digital cue. At the same time, such compression increases the risk of overextension, misreading, and partisan appropriation. Policy communication therefore mediates the practical life of moral authority. The uptake of fatwa cannot be understood apart from the communicative forms that make it portable.

The discussion also reveals important strengths and limitations. One strength lies in the infrastructure-based approach, which makes visible the interaction between clerical reasoning, administrative routine, and digital circulation. Another lies in the emphasis on conditionality, which avoids treating religious authority as uniformly decisive across all local settings. At the same time, local variation remains substantial, and the relative force of fatwa cues may differ according to sector, region, bureaucratic capacity, and political competition. The focus on public documents and visible

communication also cannot fully capture backstage bargaining or informal negotiations that shape uptake. One notable complexity is that fatwa may enable policy coordination in some contexts while provoking backlash in others. This dual possibility is not accidental. It reflects the same infrastructural features that make fatwa portable, visible, and politically useful. Enabling and contesting effects arise from the same mechanisms.

Future inquiry would benefit from closer comparison across provinces, municipalities, and sector-specific governance arenas such as welfare, licensing, education, and public order. More attention is also needed to clerical-bureaucratic networks and to the actors who translate religious reasoning into policy language inside local administrations. Comparative study of audience reception would deepen understanding of how publics interpret fatwa cues and under what conditions they accept, resist, or reinterpret them. Research on digital formats and authority markers could also clarify how different communication styles shape the portability of moral claims in networked governance. Practical relevance lies in helping democratic institutions recognize that religious authority in local politics is often mediated through translation and publicity rather than through overt coercion. More reflective institutional mediation could improve accountability without denying the continuing significance of moral reasoning in Indonesian public life. Fatwa as infrastructure therefore remains a crucial lens for understanding how decentralized governance, public legitimacy, and digital communication now intersect.

CONCLUSION

Fatwa becomes politically consequential in Indonesia's subnational governance when it functions as infrastructure rather than as a stand-alone theological text. The discussion has emphasized that its practical force lies in the way religious reasoning is translated into governance cues, invoked as reputational protection, amplified through recognizable authority markers, and stabilized within local political and administrative arrangements. In this form, fatwa helps lower the transaction costs of signaling that a decision is morally legitimate in settings where officials face both bureaucratic constraints and morally attentive publics. Its influence is therefore not automatic or uniform, since similar texts can generate different outcomes depending on coalition alignment, administrative discretion, media architecture, and the strength of counter-mobilization. Digital circulation further intensifies this process by making fatwa easier to compress, cite, and publicly defend, while also increasing the possibility of reinterpretation and contestation. Subnational governance in Indonesia is thus shaped not only by formal law or electoral strategy, but by the routinized movement of moral authority across administrative and communicative infrastructures. The broader implication is that religious authority enters local democratic governance through mediated and conditional pathways that are both enabling and politically contested.

The article contributes to the field by offering an infrastructure-based framework for understanding how fatwa becomes actionable in decentralized democratic governance. Its main conceptual contribution lies in shifting the analysis from fatwa as text to fatwa as an enabling arrangement that links clerical legitimacy, bureaucratic routine, and networked publicity. This perspective extends earlier scholarship on Islamization, moral regulation, and decentralization by showing that religious authority is not simply imposed from above or diffused abstractly through discourse, but translated into policy-relevant cues that acquire force through administrative and digital mediation. The framework also adds to studies of digital politics by demonstrating that platform visibility and authority markers are not peripheral to governance, but part of how policy legitimacy is assembled and contested

in public life. By integrating translation, reputational signaling, amplification, and local scope variation into one analytical model, the article provides a more precise explanation of how religious reasoning becomes politically usable. In this sense, the contribution is both empirical and theoretical, because it clarifies the pathways through which moral authority travels between clerical institutions, local state actors, and networked publics. It also strengthens the study of Indonesian democracy by showing that subnational governance must be understood through the interaction of institutional practice and mediated legitimacy.

Future research should extend this framework through closer comparison across provinces, municipalities, and sector-specific governance arenas in order to identify how different policy fields shape the uptake of fatwa as an infrastructural resource. Greater attention is also needed to clerical-bureaucratic networks, especially the actors who translate religious reasoning into administrative language and public communication. Comparative work on audience reception would further deepen understanding of how different publics interpret fatwa cues, under what conditions they confer legitimacy, and when they mobilize resistance or reinterpretation. More explicit study of digital formats, citation chains, and visual authority markers would also help explain how communicative compression affects the portability and contestability of moral claims in local politics. There is practical value in developing institutional arrangements that preserve the role of moral reasoning in public life while strengthening accountability, transparency, and deliberative openness in subnational governance. Advancing these lines of inquiry remains important for understanding how religious authority, democratic legitimacy, and digital communication continue to intersect in Indonesia's decentralized political order.

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