God, Greed, and Governance: The Role of Islamic Symbolism in Concealing Corruption in Northeastern Kenya

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Abstract

This article explores how Islamic symbolism is used by political and business elites in Northeastern Kenya to obscure corrupt practices and maintain public legitimacy. Using a qualitative research design, the study draws on 40 semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and field observations across Garissa, Wajir, and Mandera counties. Five thematic findings emerge: the strategic use of religiosity for image control, institutional silence by religious leaders, community tolerance through moral trade-offs, ritualised governance performances, and widespread public cynicism coupled with resignation. While many participants recognised the disconnect between religious symbolism and ethical leadership, Islamic rituals and language continued to be effective in shielding elites from scrutiny. The study contributes to political sociology and Islamic studies debates by showing how religious identity when strategically performed, can serve as a moral shield that complicates accountability in fragile governance environments.

INTRODUCTION

Religious symbolism has long played a central role in the construction and performance of political authority. In Muslim-majority regions, public displays of Islamic devotion often act as a moral currency for leaders seeking legitimacy. However, these symbols can be appropriated in contexts of weak governance to deflect scrutiny, obscure misconduct, and sustain morally questionable rules. This article investigates how Islamic symbolism is strategically mobilised by political and business elites in Northeastern Kenya to shield themselves from accusations of corruption. It also examines how local communities interpret these symbolic acts and the extent to which they are accepted, challenged, or ignored.

This study is situated at the intersection of *Political Sociology* and *Religion and Society. It draws* insights from several subfields to examine how elites employ Islamic symbolism to conceal corruption and maintain legitimacy in Northeastern Kenya. At the framework's core are two interrelated concepts: religious symbolism by elites and the tension between public piety and private misconduct. These concepts are central to understanding how leaders construct a morally credible image through spiritual practices, language, and affiliation despite allegations or evidence of corruption.

To unpack these dynamics, the study draws from five key subfields: 1) Political Anthropology to help analyse how power is performed through culturally embedded practices, including using religious rituals and language by political actors. 2) Sociology of Religion explores the social functions of public religiosity and how religious authority interacts with political authority. 3) Corruption and Governance Studies provide a lens to examine informal power networks, legitimacy strategies, and accountability failures within governance systems. 4) African and Islamic Studies contextualise the role of Islam in public life, particularly in Muslim-majority societies such as Northeastern Kenya. 5) Development Studies address how corrupt elites co-opt religious identity, impacting service delivery, trust in institutions, and citizen engagement.

This framework engages with ongoing scholarly debates on the moral economy of corruption, the selective use of religious legitimacy, and the ambiguity of moral judgment in contexts where clan loyalty, poverty, and state neglect shape public life. It highlights how religious legitimacy can act as a *shield*, neutralising criticism and enabling corrupt actors to retain authority.

The study identifies a critical knowledge gap in the literature. While the role of religion in public life is well documented, less attention has been given to how Islamic piety is strategically performed in marginalised, weak-state contexts to mask unethical behaviour. This gap is particularly relevant in Northeastern Kenya, where religious identity is central to public life, yet corruption remains a

persistent challenge. By situating the research within this multi-layered framework, the study aims to enhance understanding of how religion functions not only as personal faith but also as a political resource that can reinforce, conceal, or challenge corruption.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore how public figures in Northeastern Kenya utilise Islamic symbolism to conceal or rationalise corruption and how local communities interpret these performances. The qualitative approach is vital for capturing the nuanced, context-specific understandings of religious legitimacy, moral perception, and political behaviour that are not easily quantifiable. The research draws from political sociology, religious studies, and the anthropology of corruption, emphasising the social meanings, narratives, and performances surrounding public use of Islamic rituals and language. It builds on the conceptual framework discussed earlier, where religiosity is understood as both a performative and political act, and corruption is interpreted through local moral economies shaped by community expectations.

Fieldwork was carried out in Garissa, Wajir, and Mandera - three predominantly Muslim counties in Northeastern Kenya marked by marginalisation, limited state presence, and clan-based political systems. These regions offered an ideal context for examining how symbolic religiosity operates within fragile governance structures. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, emphasising those with lived or observed experiences relevant to the study. The sample consisted of local political elites, business figures with prominent public religious profiles, religious leaders like imams and madrassa heads, community elders and youth influencers, and ordinary residents—men and women alike—from various clan backgrounds. A total of 40 in-depth interviews were conducted across these categories to facilitate triangulation and highlight competing narratives.

The data collection process spanned three months and included semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, field observations, and document analysis. Interviews with elites and religious figures focused on public morality, symbolic performance, and legitimacy. Focus groups with ordinary residents examined how these public acts were perceived and interpreted. The research also involved direct observations of Friday sermons, public religious gatherings, and political events, along with a review of political speeches, sermons, posters, and social media content to trace the use of Islamic symbolism across various platforms.

Interviews were conducted in English, Swahili, or Somali, based on the participant's preference, and were recorded with informed consent.

Transcriptions were coded using NVivo 12, and thematic analysis revealed patterns and tensions. Codes were deductively linked to theoretical concepts such as religious shielding and moral justification. They were inductively derived from the data, uncovering themes like ritual credibility, sermon silence, and ethical trade-offs. Significant contradictions between public statements and private beliefs provided insights into how legitimacy is negotiated in complex moral contexts.

The researcher's familiarity with Somali culture and fluency in the language provided insider access but required active reflexivity to prevent imposing normative judgments. While some response bias was anticipated, particularly from religious and political elites presenting an idealised image, this was mitigated by triangulating interview data with public observations and community-level discussions. This methodological approach enabled the study to move beyond surface-level critiques of corruption and delve into how religious symbolism becomes a tool for moral negotiation, deflection, and legitimisation in a socio-politically fragile environment.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Religion is central to legitimising political authority, particularly in contexts where formal institutions are weak or mistrusted. Foundational works in political sociology and anthropology illustrate how religious symbols and identity are frequently employed to assert moral leadership and unify political communities (Weber, 1978; Geertz, 1973). Public displays of piety - such as attending mosques, engaging in charitable acts, making Quranic references, and wearing religious attire - are markers of credibility and trustworthiness in Muslim-majority societies. These performances go beyond personal expressions of belief; they are strategic actions to shape public perception. This is particularly evident in Northeastern Kenya, where political and business elites often invoke Islamic values and rituals to bolster their legitimacy.

The concept of religious performance is central to understanding this phenomenon. As Goffman (1959) suggests, individuals often present themselves in socially acceptable ways to control impressions. In Islamic contexts, piety is internal and expressed through public behaviour - ritual prayer, modest dress, and communal charity - forms that Mahmood (2005) argues are essential to religious subjectivity. Scholars such as Bayat (2013) and Deeb (2006) have shown that these expressions of faith often become more pronounced in politically charged moments, such as elections or public scandals, where the display of religiosity serves to project moral authority and deflect attention from misconduct.

In many African societies, including Kenya, the public's interpretation of corruption is shaped as much by moral expectations and legal definitions. Olivier

de Sardan (1999) proposes the idea of a "moral economy of corruption," where acts considered corrupt under formal law may be socially tolerated if they fulfil communal expectations. Smith (2007) and Roitman (2005) extend this argument by showing how leaders who deliver symbolic or material benefits to their communities are often forgiven for unethical behaviour, especially if they maintain a strong public moral image. In Northeastern Kenya, leaders who invest in mosque construction, madrassa sponsorship, or Ramadan food distributions may be perceived as good Muslims despite evidence of corruption.

This paradox is further complicated by the selective use of Islamic ethics in political rhetoric. While Islamic teachings emphasise justice (ʿadl), honesty (ṣidq), and trust (amāna), these values are often invoked symbolically rather than substantively. Abou El Fadl (2001) critiques how authoritarian figures manipulate Islamic discourse to appear righteous while justifying unjust practices. Similarly, Hadiz (2016) introduces the concept of "Islamic populism" to describe how leaders strategically use religious identity to mobilise support and suppress dissent, particularly in marginalised or conflict-prone societies. In Northeastern Kenya, this dynamic is visible in how religious imagery and references mask state failure, mismanagement of public funds, and exclusionary politics.

Despite a growing body of work on governance in Kenya and the Horn of Africa, the role of Islamic symbolism in concealing corruption remains understudied. Most analyses have concentrated on ethnicity, claim, and electoral behaviour (Lynch, 2011; Kanyinga, 2014), while others have explored Islam in Somalia from the perspective of state collapse and religious authority (Menkhaus, 2007; Hussein, 2011). These studies highlight the interconnectedness of clan, religion, and politics but do not thoroughly examine how Islamic piety is a performance that reinforces power and neutralises critique. This study responds to that gap by investigating the public use of Islamic symbols, language, and rituals by elites in Northeastern Kenya as a means of moral camouflage. It focuses on how communities interpret these performances when they tolerate or challenge them and what this reveals about the moral economy of governance in a peripheral, Muslim-majority region.

Drawing on insights from political sociology, religious studies, and governance research, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how public religiosity is deployed to express faith and strategically manage perceptions, secure legitimacy, and resist accountability in a fragile political context.

This study examined how public figures in Northeastern Kenya utilise Islamic symbolism to obscure corruption and how local communities interpret, engage with, or resist these symbolic acts. Based on 40 in-depth interviews, four

focus group discussions, field observations, and document reviews across Garissa, Wajir, and Mandera counties, the study reveals that Islamic religiosity functions not only as a spiritual expression but also as a profoundly strategic tool for moral legitimisation. The analysis is organised into five interconnected themes: (1) Instrumental religiosity as a strategy of image control, (2) The complicity of silence among religious institutions, (3) The moral economy of tolerance, (4) Rituals as performative governance, and (5) Community awareness, cynicism, and resignation.

1. Instrumental Religiosity as a Strategy of Image Control

Participants across all counties described a pattern in which public officials and business elites engaged in heightened Islamic activity during politically sensitive moments-particularly around elections, corruption scandals, or leadership transitions. These activities included donating to mosque construction, organising iftar dinners, funding Qur'an competitions, dressing in religious attire, or visibly participating in Friday prayers.

Such displays were consistently interpreted as image management strategies rather than genuine expressions of faith. A political analyst in Garissa remarked,

"Piety is part of the costume. It's worn when power needs cleansing."

Leaders appeared to understand that Islamic identity has symbolic power within a moral community, especially where formal accountability mechanisms are weak. Through visible religiosity, they signalled moral credibility, often neutralising misconduct accusations.

This supports Mahmood's (2005) notion of religious embodiment as social performance while extending it to show how symbolic acts of faith are mobilised to resist moral scrutiny, not just conform to spiritual discipline.

2. The Complicity of Silence Among Religious Institutions

Interviews with imams, madrassa leaders, and Islamic council representatives revealed a widespread reluctance to publicly challenge corrupt elites - particularly those who maintained a strong religious image or contributed financially to religious institutions. While many acknowledged privately that specific figures were morally compromised, few were willing to voice criticism in public sermons or community forums.

This silence was often described as a product of pragmatism, dependency, and fear. Several religious leaders cited the risk of alienating donors or being accused of political bias. A madrassa principal in Mandera explained

"You cannot bite the hand that builds your mosque... so you stay silent, even when you know."

This institutional silence legitimises elite behaviour by providing moral cover and discouraging dissent. It reflects a fragile moral landscape in which religious institutions are entangled with the same power structures they are meant to critique. The findings resonate with Abou El Fadl's (2001) concerns about the co-optation of Islamic authority for political purposes.

3. The Moral Economy of Tolerance

Community-level respondents often articulated a moral trade-off logic in which religious gestures by elites were regarded as partial compensation for unethical governance. Participants described how building mosques, engaging in charity, and exhibiting public piety could "balance out" the misuse of public funds or nepotism. In many instances, these actions were viewed not only as political performances but also as contributions to the common good - especially in a region where the state has historically failed to deliver adequate services.

A young man in a Wajir FGD captured this sentiment:

"Maybe he's corrupt, but he prays, gives food, and helps the madrassa. At least he does something."

This moral calculus reveals how public religiosity can substitute for formal accountability, primarily when moral-symbolic actions shape the community's expectations more than legal standards. This dynamic echoes Olivier de Sardan's (1999) moral economy of corruption, where local ethics mediate formal wrongdoing.

4. Rituals as Performative Governance

Field observations during political rallies, community meetings, and development launches revealed the ritualisation of public office. Events were often opened with Qur'anic recitations, presided over by religious scholars, or concluded with public duʿāʾ (supplication). These rituals were more than cultural formalities - they were acts of religious legitimation that framed political leadership as divinely sanctioned.

These staged performances were often accompanied by media coverage and social media circulation, reinforcing the visibility of piety. As one activist in Garissa noted,

"There is always a camera when the governor gives a mosque a carpet or kneels for prayer. It's not faith - it's branding."

This ritual dimension highlights how Islamic symbolism is not just spoken or worn - it is choreographed, turning governance into a sacred spectacle. The public spectacle of religion masks structural failures, shifts focus from delivery to devotion, and blurs the line between the political and the spiritual.

5. Community Awareness, Cynicism, and Resignation

Notably, the study finds that these displays do not uniformly deceive communities. Many participants expressed cynicism about religious elites' sincerity and moral claims. While some viewed religious acts by leaders as better than nothing, others expressed frustration at what they saw as manipulative and hypocritical behaviour. A teacher in Mandera summarised:

"We are not fools. We see the contradiction. But who will speak? Who will listen?"

This awareness, however, often coexisted with resignation. The absence of alternative leaders, the strength of clan loyalty, and the weakness of enforcement institutions created a context where public religiosity remained effective despite widespread scepticism. It was not simply that people believed in the religious image but felt powerless to contest it meaningfully.

This finding reinforces the idea that religious legitimacy functions not because it is fully believed but because it is tolerated and reproduced through silence, dependency, and exhaustion.

Together, these findings demonstrate that in Northeastern Kenya, Islamic symbolism serves as a flexible and potent shield for public figures facing ethical scrutiny. It operates through performance, institutional complicity, and moral trade-offs, reinforcing a system where visible piety is often valued over transparent governance. The data confirms and expands on existing literature by showing how religion functions not as an antidote to corruption but as one of its most resilient disguises in politically fragile and religiously conscious settings.

This study contributes to a growing body of scholarship that examines the interplay between religion, power, and moral legitimacy in politically fragile contexts. Specifically, it provides empirical evidence of how public figures in Northeastern Kenya strategically use Islamic symbolism to deflect accusations of corruption and reinforce their authority. The findings illuminate the complex ways religiosity - when publicly deployed - serves as a performance of morality and a mechanism for political survival.

At the heart of the analysis is the understanding that religious identity is a form of political capital in a weakly institutionalised and religiously aware environment like Northeastern Kenya. Elites meticulously curate their public persona through mosque-building, Qur'anic invocations, charitable acts, and ritual visibility. These behaviours align with what Goffman (1959) calls "impression management," where actors create a credible front stage to shape public perception. In this case, Islamic religiosity functions as the moral costume through which public actors convey trustworthiness, sincerity, and moral authority - often as a strategic counter to the reputational harm caused by corrupt actions.

This study confirms that Islamic symbolism is not simply an expression of faith but a moral technology strategically mobilised to blur the line between ethical leadership and performative piety. This resonates with Bayat's (2013) analysis of "post-Islamism," where religious forms are retained and displayed while their ethical substance is hollowed out for political ends. The findings show that public religiosity in Northeastern Kenya is often stripped of its theological depth and repurposed as a shield against accountability.

Equally important is the role of religious institutions and clerics in sustaining this moral ambiguity. While Islam has historically positioned religious leaders as societal watchdogs, the data shows that many religious authorities refrain from speaking out against corrupt elites - particularly those who are publicly devout and materially generous. This institutional silence - whether driven by fear, financial dependency, or clan loyalty - undermines the moral authority of the mosque and transforms it into a space of complicity. Abou El Fadl's (2001) critique of authoritarian appropriation of Islamic discourse is particularly relevant here. In Northeastern Kenya, the mufti and the governor may not be the same person, but they frequently operate in a mutually beneficial silence.

The study's contribution lies in exploring how elite actors and the community negotiate moral legitimacy. The findings indicate a "moral economy of tolerance" (Olivier de Sardan, 1999; Smith, 2007), in which citizens assess a leader's failings against their religiosity, symbolic contributions, and service to communal or clan interests. In this economy, a leader who builds mosques, sponsors madrassas, and performs public rituals is often regarded as more tolerable than one who does not - regardless of the extent of their misconduct. As several participants noted, *"At least he gives something back."* This underscores the instrumental role of religious gestures in sustaining public support, even amid ethical contradictions.

Moreover, this study's ritualisation of political power is a significant theme. Field observations revealed how public events are infused with religious scripts and symbols—blessings by sheikhs, Qur'anic recitations, and public duʿāʾ—converting political performances into religious ceremonies. These acts are choreographed to invoke divine sanction, blur boundaries between faith and governance, and secure symbolic loyalty. This phenomenon aligns with literature on civil religion and political theology, but with a localised twist: rituals are used not to sacralise the state but to purify the leader.

One of the more sobering findings is the disconnect between public awareness and collective action. While many respondents recognised the performative nature of elite religiosity, they also expressed a sense of

resignation or helplessness. Cynicism toward elites did not translate into organised resistance or calls for reform. Instead, many participants accepted the system as inevitable or, worse, as the best available option in the absence of transparent institutions. This reflects a deeper structural problem: where formal accountability mechanisms are weak, and clan dynamics dominate access to power, religious legitimacy becomes the last remaining moral currency - even if it is counterfeit.

The implications of these findings extend beyond the Northeastern region. In many Muslim-majority or religiously active societies, particularly in the Global South, faith-based symbolism is increasingly co-opted by political actors to strengthen their moral position. However, as this study demonstrates, the issue is not solely with the elites who exhibit piety but also with the broader moral ecosystem that tolerates, rewards, and even relies on these performances. Religious institutions, community expectations, and political incentives converge to sustain a legitimacy structure in which Islamic identity replaces ethical conduct.

In short, religion in this context does not serve as a check on corruption. Instead, it is embedded in the architecture of corrupt governance-not despite Islam, but through it. This finding challenges romanticised notions of faith as a solution to political decay and calls for a more critical engagement with how religious performance operates in political life.

CONCLUSIONS

This article has shown that in Northeastern Kenya, Islamic religiosity functions as a strategic performance that enables corrupt elites to maintain legitimacy. Religious acts, language, and affiliations assert personal piety and insulate political actors from criticism. While often aware of these contradictions, communities engage in moral trade-offs that sustain the legitimacy of visibly religious figures. Constantly constrained by fear, finance, and politics, religious institutions rarely intervene.

These findings challenge assumptions about religion as an inherent force for moral good in politics. Instead, they highlight how religious performance can be co-opted as a political resource, especially in governance systems marked by informality, inequality, and weak accountability. The study calls for renewed critical attention to how faith, power, and performance interact in Kenya and the Muslim world.

In practical terms, the study recommends that religious leaders reconsider their public role and moral obligations by fostering greater institutional independence and ethical consistency. Islamic councils and mosque committees could establish more precise standards for public association with political actors and prioritise transparency in religious fundraising and endorsements. For governance actors and anti-corruption bodies, engaging faith-based leaders as partners in civic education and ethical governance initiatives could help disrupt the normalisation of symbolic religiosity as a substitute for accountability.

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