MIKAILALSYS
Journal of Multidisciplinary Sciences

e-ISSN : 2987-2286
p-ISSN : 2987-3924

Index: Harvard, Boston, Sydney, Copernicus, Sinta 4, Scilit, Semantic, Google, etc

https://doi.org/10.58578/mikailalsys.v4i2.10208

The Legitimacy of Religion and Power: A Study of the Transformation of the Safavid Dynasty from Order to State

Ahmad Zaim Muchlisi A'la & Fadil SJ
UIN Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang, Indonesia
250201220012@student.uin-malang.ac.id; fadilsj@syariah.uin-malang.ac.id

Article Info:

Submitted:	Revised:	Accepted:	Published:
Apr 6, 2026	May 4, 2026	May 16, 2026	May 21, 2026

Abstract

This study analyzes the transformation of the Safavid Dynasty from a Sufi order into an institutionalized state, with religious legitimacy positioned as a central factor in the formation and consolidation of political power. It aims to demonstrate that religion functioned not only as a belief system but also as a strategic instrument for establishing authority within a premodern socio-political context. This study employed a qualitative approach with a historical-analytical design, using secondary data derived from classical works, academic books, and journal articles. The analysis was conducted using Max Weber's theory of legitimacy and a political theology approach. The findings indicate that, in its early phase, the Safavid Order relied on religious charismatic authority. Over time, this authority developed into a more structured political power system, particularly under the leadership of Ismail I. The establishment of Twelver Shiism as the official state ideology became a key factor in fostering social integration, strengthening political legitimacy, and shaping a distinctive collective identity. Religious legitimacy was not merely symbolic but was systematically institutionalized through educational, legal, and administrative structures, enabling the continuity of political stability despite internal and external challenges. The study concludes that the Safavid transformation

Mikailalsys is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License

demonstrates how religious legitimacy can operate as an integrative force linking spiritual authority, political structures, and social cohesion in the formation of a sustainable state. These findings contribute to historical and political theology studies by clarifying the role of religious legitimacy in the institutionalization of power in premodern Islamic governance.

Keywords: Political Theology; Premodern Islamic Governance; Religious Legitimacy; Safavid Dynasty; Twelver Shiism

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between religion and power is a key issue in the study of Islamic civilization as well as world political history in general. The discussion does not stop at the theological dimension, but also touches on how authority is established, legitimized, and maintained within socio-political structures (Muhaimin et al., 2024). In many pre-modern societies, religion was not positioned as a realm separate from the state, but rather served as the primary source of legitimacy for power. Religion provided a symbolic language that offered a moral and ideological foundation for rulers to govern. This pattern is clearly evident in the history of the Safavid Dynasty in Persia, which underwent a major transformation from a spiritual movement into an organized political power (Sofi, 2024).

The Safavid Dynasty originally grew out of the Safavid Order, a Sufi order that emphasized spiritual cultivation, asceticism, and the strengthening of individual piety. In its early stages, the movement did not exhibit a strong political orientation, as its primary focus was on building a religious life and closeness to God. However, the socio-political dynamics of Persia and the patterns of internal leadership succession drove the order to expand beyond its spiritual functions. The most decisive change occurred when leadership fell into the hands of Ismail I. Through this figure, the order's spiritual foundation succeeded in being transformed into a source of political power, ultimately giving rise to the Safavid Dynasty in the early 16th century.

The transition from a religious order to a state cannot be understood merely as an organizational change, but also as a profound ideological shift. The most strategic move made by Ismail I was to establish Twelver Shi'ism as the state's official school of thought. This policy was not only a symbol of religious identity but also a political instrument for consolidating power and strengthening legitimacy over the newly unified Persian territories

(Aji, 2022a). From that point on, religion was no longer confined to the private sphere or ritual practices. Still, it became a tool of the state that shaped social structures, regulated political life, and influenced Safavid society's culture.

Studies of the Safavid period have become increasingly important in relation to the formation of modern Iran's historical identity. The policy of institutionalizing Twelver Shiism brought about major changes in the religious and political landscape of the Persian region. This transformation simultaneously created a clear dividing line of identity between Safavid Persia and the surrounding Sunni Islamic powers, particularly the Ottoman Empire. These differences were not merely theological but evolved into political, social, and cultural identities that persisted into the modern era (Seputra & Suyatno, 2024). Thus, the Safavid era can be understood as a turning point in Islamic history, illustrating how religion was used as the foundation for state-building and the formation of a collective identity.

In academic literature, the Safavid dynasty has been extensively studied from various perspectives. Savory (1980) emphasizes the role of military institutions, particularly the Qizilbash, as a key factor in both the formation and stability of Safavid power. According to him, Safavid political power was heavily dependent on tribal-based military loyalty, which was subsequently institutionalized within the state structure. Shani (2009) views the Safavids as a catalyst for the revival of Persian identity combined with Shi'ite ideology, resulting in a distinctive synthesis of local traditions and religious doctrine. Meanwhile, Rezaei et al. (2020) highlight the process of Shi'ite sectarianism during the Safavid era and its impact on social structures and religious institutions in Persia.

Although these studies make important contributions, most remain partial in nature. Analyses of the military, religious, and social dimensions are often treated in isolation, and thus have not yet produced a comprehensive picture of how these three elements mutually reinforced one another in the process of the Safavid state's formation. Consequently, there remains a gap in explaining how religious legitimacy functioned as a unifying link that integrated spiritual power, political structures, and social realities into a single, integrated system of power (Samudra et al., 2024).

In addition, there is also a theoretical gap in relating the Safavids to a broader conceptual framework. One relevant approach is Max Weber's theory of legitimacy, which divides authority into three main types: charismatic, traditional, and rational-legal. In the

Safavid context, authority that was initially charismatic—inherent in the leader of the order—later transformed into traditional-theocratic authority when institutionalized within the state structure. However, this transition process has not been studied in depth, particularly regarding how this religious legitimacy was constructed and operated in Safavid governance practices (Qoirunnisa & Wahyuni, 2025).

Another relevant framework is political theology, which emphasizes the connection between concepts of divinity and structures of political power. This approach views the state not merely as an administrative institution, but as a power structure that is often rooted in theological foundations. In the case of the Safavids, this is evident in the use of Shi'ite doctrine as a source of state legitimacy (Andhika et al., 2024). Nevertheless, previous studies have not been sufficiently comprehensive in explaining how this doctrine is translated into state policy and implemented in day-to-day governance.

Furthermore, the Safavid experience demonstrates that state formation is determined not only by military strength or territorial expansion, but also by the ability to establish strong ideological legitimacy. In this context, the Safavid state can be understood as an early form of a theocratic state—that is, a state that unites religious authority and political power within a single structure. Religion serves not only as a source of values but also as a tool for political integration and an effective mechanism of social control (Iqbal, 2014).

When analyzed through the lens of state formation theory, Safawi demonstrates that the formation of pre-modern states relies on a combination of coercive power and symbolic legitimacy. In societies lacking a complex modern bureaucracy, religion often serves as the primary instrument for building stability and fostering social cohesion. Consequently, Safawi is not only significant as a historical subject but also serves as a useful analytical model for understanding how states can emerge through the interplay of ideology, power, and social structures.

Given these various gaps, this study aims to comprehensively examine the transformation of the Safavid Dynasty from a Sufi order into an institutionalized state. Its primary focus is to explain how religious legitimacy was used as a key instrument in the formation, consolidation, and sustainability of Safavid political power. To strengthen the analysis, this study integrates a Weberian political sociology approach and the concept of

political theology so that the relationship between religion and the state can be understood more comprehensively.

Ultimately, this study is expected not only to enrich the study of Islamic history but also to broaden the theoretical understanding of the dynamics of state formation based on religion. Thus, this research can provide a more comprehensive picture of how religion, power, and identity intertwine in shaping political civilization, particularly in the context of modern Iranian history and the long legacy of the Safavid Dynasty (Newman, 2006).

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach with a historical-analytical design to understand the transformation of the Safavid Dynasty from a Sufi order into an institutionalized state, as well as the role of religious legitimacy in that process. The research data consists of secondary data obtained from primary and secondary sources, such as classical historical works, academic books, and journal articles relevant to the Safavid Dynasty, political legitimacy, and the development of Shi'ism in Persia (Adlini et al., 2022; Cresswell, 2012; Moleong, 2018). Sources were selected purposely based on their relevance and depth of discussion, particularly regarding the dynamics of religion and power. The researchers acted as the primary instrument (human instrument) responsible for data collection, selection, reading, and interpretation, utilizing a document analysis sheet to categorize information thematically, such as religious legitimacy, political structure, and the institutionalization of power.

The research procedures include literature review, source selection, recording of key data, thematic grouping, and historical interpretation based on a theoretical framework (Moleong, 2014; Sugiyono, 2019). Data analysis was conducted through content analysis and historical-interpretive analysis by linking the literature findings to Max Weber's theory of legitimacy and the political theology approach to explain how religion functioned as a primary instrument in the formation and consolidation of the Safavid Dynasty's power.

RESULTS

The Transformation of Sufi Orders into Political Forces

The transformation of the Safavid Order from a spiritual movement into a political force was one of the most significant historical processes in the formation of the Safavid Dynasty and serves as a classic example of how a religious institution can evolve into the foundation of a state (Yatim, 2013). In its early stages, this order functioned as a Sufi community focused on spiritual development, moral education, and ascetic practices (M. A. Syukur, 2014). Its organizational structure remains simple and relies heavily on the personal relationship between the spiritual guide and the disciple. At this stage, authority derives entirely from religious charisma, rather than from institutional structures or formal political power (Muhamad & Musa, 2024).

However, major changes in the socio-political structure of the Islamic world from the 14th to the 16th centuries became a decisive external factor shaping the development of this order (Zulharman et al., 2024). The regions of Persia, Anatolia, and their surroundings were in a state of political fragmentation following the weakening of the power of the former great empires. The absence of a stable state authority created a power vacuum that was subsequently filled by various local actors, including military groups, small dynasties, and religious institutions (Lapidus, 2014). In this context, religion serves not only as a belief system but also as a source of social legitimacy capable of providing stability amid political uncertainty (Zaprulkhan, 2014).

In this context, the Safavid Order began to gradually expand its functions. From its origins as a spiritual institution, the order evolved into a vast and structured social network (Rubaidi, 2021). This expansion occurred not only geographically but also socially, with the inclusion of various social groups from Persia, Anatolia, and the Caucasus. This network was formed through a combination of spiritual preaching, patronage relationships, and high socio-economic mobility (Fathurahman, 2016). Thus, the order began to function as a social organization capable of mobilizing the masses on a large scale.

Table 1. Structural and Functional Evolution of the Safavid Order

Aspects	Early Spiritual Phase	Social Expansion Phase	Political-Military Phase
Main Focus	Spirituality and Asceticism	Social Mobilization	Expansion of Power
Organizational	Simple and personal	Cross-regional	Hierarchical and

structure		network	coordinated
Bases of Legitimacy	Religious charisma	Charisma + social loyalty	Charisma + military strength
Key Functions	Moral education	Social solidarity	Political mobilization
Role in the Conflict	None	Indirect	Active and Strategy

One of the most important factors in this transformation is the role of religious charisma. In the Sufi tradition, a mursyid possesses very strong spiritual authority (M. A. Syukur, 2014). However, within the Safavid context, the role of charisma expanded. The leader of the order was not only viewed as a spiritual guide but also as a figure possessing the moral and social authority to guide the community during times of crisis. From Max Weber's perspective, this situation reflects the dominance of charismatic authority, which serves as the foundational basis for the formation of power prior to its institutionalization (Weber, 1964).

As its social influence grew, the Safavid Order began to become involved in the dynamics of regional conflict. At that time, the regions of Persia and Anatolia were in a state of unstable rivalry among local powers. In this context, the order's followers served not only as spiritual disciples but also as a mobilization force that could be deployed in armed conflict (A. Syukur, 2014). This involvement marks a significant shift from a spiritual institution to a socio-political actor with military capabilities.

Internal organizational transformations further reinforced these changes. The leadership structure, which had initially been simple, began to evolve into a more hierarchical and systematic one. Leaders' authority was no longer limited to spiritual matters but also encompassed the management of networks of followers, the coordination of mobilization efforts, and strategic decision-making (Abdurrahman, 2011). The loyalty of the followers also underwent a shift, from individual spiritual loyalty to collective, organization-based loyalty. This process indicates that the order began to exhibit the initial characteristics of an organized political entity.

During this phase, the emergence of the Qizilbash became a decisive factor. The Qizilbash were a military group composed of followers of the Safavid Order who were deeply loyal to their spiritual leader. This group served as the primary military force enabling the Safavid political expansion. More than just a military force, the Qizilbash also acted as an instrument of integration between religious authority and coercive power

(Savory, 1980). This integration demonstrates that the order had evolved into a quasi-state structure prior to the formation of a formal state

This transformation reached a crucial juncture when Ismail I emerged as a leader who successfully consolidated all elements of the order into a state structure. Ismail not only leveraged the existing spiritual network but also transformed it into the foundation of a centralized political power. At this point, the Safavid Order no longer stood as an independent institution but had become an integral part of the formation of the Safavid Dynasty. This process marked the transition from charismatic authority to institutionalized political authority.

Furthermore, one of the most important aspects of this transformation is the use of religion as an instrument of state legitimacy. The designation of Twelver Shiism as the state's official school of thought has proven to be a highly effective political strategy for fostering internal cohesion. Religion serves not only as a system of belief but also as a tool for uniting society under a shared political identity (Driessen, 2024). In this context, religion serves as both a mechanism for social integration and a powerful tool for political control. Relations with other powers, such as the Ottoman Empire, also strengthened the Safavid political identity. The ideological differences between Shia and Sunni were not merely theological but also served as the basis for the establishment of clear political boundaries. In this context, religion functioned both as a marker of identity and as a tool for internal power consolidation.

From the perspective of state formation theory, the Safavid case demonstrates that a state is not formed solely by military power but also by the ability to create symbolic and ideological legitimacy. Religion provides a framework of meaning that enables society to accept political authority as legitimate. Thus, power is not merely imposed but also accepted through the construction of religious legitimacy. Viewed more broadly, the transformation of the Safawiyah Order demonstrates that the boundary between religion and politics in premodern societies was highly fluid. Religion did not stand apart from politics; rather, it was an integral part of the political formation process itself (Gentile, 2020). The Order did not undergo secularization, but rather an expansion of its functions that made it the core of the new state structure.

Ultimately, this transformation demonstrates that religious institutions have great potential to evolve into political forces under certain social conditions. This process is not a

single event, but the result of a long accumulation of interactions between religious charisma, social networks, regional conflicts, and the need for political legitimacy. Thus, the Safavid Order became the primary foundation for the emergence of the Safavid state, which subsequently played a crucial role in shaping the political and religious history of the Persian region and became the precursor to Iran's historical identity.

The Consolidation of Power by Ismail I

Ismail's consolidation of power marked the most decisive phase in the Safavid Order's transformation from a spiritual movement into an organized state. This process unfolded gradually and involved the integration of religious, social, and military power. In this context, Ismail I served not only as a political ruler but also as a charismatic figure capable of uniting spiritual legitimacy with worldly authority (Supriyadi, 2024a).

From the very beginning of his rise, Ismail I inherited a solid social base from the Safavid network that had developed in previous generations. This network spanned the regions of Persia, Anatolia, and the Caucasus, and consisted of various social groups bound by religious loyalty to the order's leader. Among the most important elements were the Qizilbash, who played a central role in political and military mobilization. Their loyalty was not merely political but also ideological, as they viewed the Safavid leader as a figure of profound spiritual stature (Ananda et al., 2024).

With that support, Ismail, I was able to carry out a rapid and effective military expansion. The conquest of Tabriz in 1501 marked a turning point in the official establishment of Safavid rule. In this city, he declared himself shah and affirmed the birth of the Safavid Dynasty as a new political power. This success not only reflected effective military strategy but also demonstrated the strength of the ideological bonds that united his followers under a single collective vision (Savagheb, 2022).

After seizing power, the next challenge was maintaining internal stability. One strategic step taken was establishing Twelver Shiism as the state's official school of thought. This policy had a significant impact, as it not only shaped the state's religious identity but also served as a tool for social integration. In a society that had previously been pluralistic in terms of religious sects and ethnicities, this policy acted as a unifying force, bringing various groups together under a single ideological framework (Syarifah, 2023).

Religion was also utilized as a source of legitimacy for power. Ismail employed religious symbolism to strengthen his position so that he was viewed not only as a king in

the political sense but also as a figure with spiritual authority. In some contexts, his position was even linked to the concept of *imamah* in the Shia tradition, which imparted a sacred dimension to his power. Thus, his political legitimacy did not rest solely on military strength, but also on the religious faith of the people (Samudra et al., 2023).

On the other hand, the consolidation of power demanded organizational restructuring. The Safavid order, which had previously been flexible—based on personal *relationships* between the mursyid and the murid—transformed into a more formal and hierarchical structure. Power was centralized in the ruler as the supreme authority controlling various aspects of government. This transformation reflected a shift from charismatic authority toward a more institutionalized authority, as explained by Max Weber in his theory of the rationalization of power.

However, this process did not proceed entirely without obstacles. One of the main challenges stemmed from the relationship between the ruler and the Qizilbash. As the primary military force, they wielded significant influence that had the potential to disrupt central stability. *Therefore*, Ismail, I had to manage this relationship carefully: maintaining their loyalty while limiting their political dominance. The strategy adopted included integrating them into the governmental system and strengthening central authority (Safitri & M, 2024).

In addition to internal dynamics, external pressures were also a key factor, particularly from the Ottoman Empire. The conflict between the Safavids and the Ottomans was not only geopolitical but also ideological, as it involved differences between Shia and Sunni Islam. The Battle of Chaldiran in 1514 was a key event that reflected this complexity. Although the Safavids suffered a defeat, the state structure they had built remained intact. It demonstrates that Safavid power did not rely solely on military victories but also on strong social and ideological foundations.

From the perspective of state formation, Ismail I's actions demonstrate that a state is built not only through coercive power but also through the creation of symbolic legitimacy. Religion serves as a framework of meaning that renders power acceptable as legitimate. Thus, the consolidation of power proceeded along two parallel paths: military domination and the internalization of ideological values within society. Ultimately, the consolidation carried out by Ismail I succeeded in forming a relatively stable and sustainable state structure. He was able to integrate various elements—ranging from Sufi

orders, military power, to religious identity—into a single centralized system of power. It underscores that in the context of pre-modern Islam, religion and politics cannot be strictly separated but are closely intertwined in the formation of power. Thus, Ismail, I emerged not only as the founder of the Safavid Dynasty but also as the principal architect of a state based on religious ideology that exerted far-reaching influence in the history of Persia and the Islamic world.

The Legitimization of Shia Islam as a State Instrument

Religious legitimacy is one of the main pillars in the establishment and maintenance of political power in pre-modern societies. In the context of the Islamic world, religion is understood not only as a system of beliefs but also as a normative framework governing social life, law, and political order. Therefore, political power during that era almost always required religious justification in order to be widely accepted. In the case of the Safavid Dynasty, the establishment of Twelver Shi'ism as the state's official school of thought was not merely a theological decision, but a deliberate political strategy designed to create stability of power and foster social cohesion within a previously fragmented Persian society (Supriyadi, 2024b). This legitimization operates in two directions simultaneously: vertically, it strengthens the rulers' authority through religious justification, while horizontally, it shapes a collective identity that unites society. Thus, religion cannot be viewed as a separate element from politics, but rather as a core component of the mechanisms underlying the formation of the Safavid state.

In the early days of the Safavid Dynasty, Persia was characterized by a pluralistic socio-religious landscape that had not yet been ideologically integrated. The majority of the population still followed the Sunni school of thought, with diverse scholarly traditions and religious practices, compounded by the presence of local groups possessing their own distinct cultural and religious identities. In such a situation, Ismail I's decision to establish Twelver Shiism as the state's official school of thought was a strategic move to foster ideological uniformity as the foundation for the formation of a national identity (Ananda et al., 2024). These policies did not remain merely symbolic but were implemented through concrete interventions in the social structure of society, particularly in the areas of education, religious practices, and the legal system. Through this process, religious identities that were previously local and diverse were gradually replaced by a single identity

constructed by the state, thereby strengthening social integration while simultaneously expanding central political control over society (Syarifah, 2023).

Moreover, Shia legitimacy provided a strong ideological foundation for the establishment of Safavid political authority, particularly through the concept of imamah in the Twelver Shia tradition. This concept emphasizes that legitimate leadership is not merely a political matter but possesses spiritual and sacred dimensions. Although Ismail I was not genealogically part of the line of imams in the orthodox theological sense, he was able to construct a symbolic narrative linking himself to that authority, thereby creating a public perception that his power possessed divine legitimacy (Samudra et al., 2023). This strategy is crucial because, in a religious society, acceptance of a ruler depends not only on military strength but also on the belief that such power is morally and spiritually legitimate. It is within this context that Shi'ite legitimacy functions to transform political power into power perceived as sacred, thereby fostering deeper and more enduring public loyalty.

This legitimacy was not only established at the ideological level but was also concretely institutionalized through systematic state policies. The Safavid dynasty built religious infrastructure such as mosques, madrasas, and Shi'ite study centers, which served as vehicles for the reproduction of the state's ideology. Shiite scholars were brought in from various regions, including Iraq and Lebanon, to strengthen the intellectual foundation while ensuring that Shiite teachings could be consistently imparted to the general public (Rosdiana et al., 2025). It demonstrates that Safavid legitimacy was not merely achieved through religious rhetoric but was solidified through educational, legal, and religious administrative institutions. Thus, the Safavid state not only controlled the territory physically but also controlled the production of knowledge and how society understood religion.

However, it should be noted that the spread of Shiism as a source of state legitimacy did not always proceed peacefully. In some situations, the state used coercive force to restrict Sunni practices, even pressuring segments of the population to convert to Shiism (Safitri & M, 2024). This fact demonstrates that political legitimacy is often built through a combination of ideological persuasion and structural coercion, particularly in the early stages of state formation. Although coercive approaches have the potential to trigger resistance, in the long term, these policies proved effective in significantly altering the

religious landscape of Persia, to the point where Shiism eventually became the dominant identity that reinforced the Safavid dynasty's political legitimacy.

In the external sphere, Shia legitimacy also played a crucial role in shaping the Safavid geopolitical identity. The doctrinal differences with the Sunni-oriented Ottoman Empire not only created theological boundaries but also clarified political ones. The Safavids positioned themselves as the embodiment of Shia power within the Islamic world, while the Ottomans emerged as the symbol of Sunni power (Aji, 2022b). The prolonged conflict between the two demonstrated that religion was not merely a matter of belief but also a strategic factor that determined patterns of alliance, hostility, and the struggle for influence. Thus, religious legitimacy served not only for internal integration but also as a tool for constructing an external identity that strengthened the Safavids' position in regional politics.

Viewed through the lens of modern political theory, this phenomenon can be understood as a form of symbolic legitimacy. Power endures not only through physical force, but because society accepts it through a system of meanings deemed legitimate. In the Safavid context, religion provided a symbolic framework that made power appear natural, just, and even sacred (Sani, 2013). This process operates through the internalization of ideological values into the collective consciousness of society, so that power is not perceived as something imposed from the outside, but rather as part of a social order that is inherently meant to be obeyed. Consequently, state legitimacy becomes far more stable as it is underpinned by social acceptance that has been shaped ideologically and culturally.

Table 2. The Role of Shia Legitimacy in the Safavid State

Aspect	Form of Implementation	Political Function	Social Impact
National Identity	Establishment of Twelver	Shiism as the official school of thought	Standardization of state ideology, Social integration
Legitimacy of Rulers	Association with the concept of imamate	Sacralization of power	Ideological loyalty
Institutionalization	Madrasahs, religious scholars, and literature	Reproduction of ideology	Religious homogenization
Political Coercion	Restrictions on Sunnis	Control of Power	Sectarian Conflict
External Differentiation	Opposition to the Ottomans	Geopolitical Identity	Regional Polarization

Thus, the use of Shia legitimacy as a state instrument during the Safavid Dynasty demonstrates that religion plays a complex yet strategic role in the formation of political power. Religion not only serves as a source of values and beliefs but is also actively utilized to build power structures, shape collective identities, and regulate relations between the state and society. In this context, the Safavids serve as a historical example illustrating how religion can be systematically integrated into state mechanisms, thereby giving rise to a form of power that is not only militarily strong but also ideologically and socially stable.

Religious Legitimacy and the Formation of the Modern State

Religious legitimacy is a fundamental factor that not only underpins the continuity of political power but also plays a direct role in transforming religious institutions into organized state structures. In the context of the Safavid Dynasty, religious legitimacy was not merely an adjunct but the primary foundation that enabled the Safavid Order to evolve from a spiritual community into a sovereign political entity. This phenomenon underscores that in pre-modern societies, the boundary between religion and politics is fluid, allowing religious authority to transition into political authority when supported by sufficient social and historical conditions (Supriyadi, 2024a). Thus, religious legitimacy in the Safavid case is not merely normative but also operational, as it directly shapes power structures, leadership patterns, and the relationship between rulers and society.

In its early phase, the Safawiyah Order functioned as a Sufi community focused on spiritual and moral development, with the mursyid–disciple relationship at the core of the organization. Authority at this stage was charismatic in nature, dependent on the personal qualities of leaders believed to possess a special closeness to God. However, as the network of followers expanded and became increasingly diverse, this charismatic authority evolved into a social force with political potential. In this context, religious legitimacy served as a mechanism for expansion, as religious charisma fostered not only spiritual loyalty but also strong social commitment (Nawawi, 2025). In other words, religious legitimacy became the foundation for the formation of collective solidarity that could subsequently be mobilized for political purposes.

This transformation reached a crucial juncture when Ismail I emerged as a leader capable of consolidating all elements of the Sufi order into a centralized political force. He not only inherited an established spiritual network but also transformed it into an instrument of state power. One of the most strategic policies was the establishment of

Twelver Shiism as the state's official ideology (Ananda et al., 2024). This move demonstrated that religion was consciously used as a political tool to build a collective identity while simultaneously strengthening the ruler's authority. In this context, religious legitimacy served not only to garner support but also to create a system of meaning that rendered power legitimate and difficult to challenge.

Furthermore, religious legitimacy is also linked to the process of the sacralization of power. Rulers are no longer viewed merely as political leaders, but also as figures with a spiritual dimension. Ismail I, for example, succeeded in establishing an image of himself as a figure possessing a special connection to divine authority. As a result, his power acquired a transcendent legitimacy. This process strengthened political stability by fostering a deeper sense of loyalty than mere material interests (Rosdiana et al., 2025). Within this framework, religious legitimacy served to transform political power into power deemed sacred.

This legitimacy did not stop at the symbolic level but was also institutionalized within the state structure. The Safavids actively established religious institutions, promoted the spread of Shia teachings, and involved religious scholars in the system of government. It demonstrates that religious legitimacy is structural in nature, as it is integrated into the state's operational mechanisms (Syarifah, 2023). Thus, religion became not only a source of legitimacy but also an integral part of the administrative system governing social life at large.

In external relations, religious legitimacy helped shape the Safavid political identity, particularly in their interactions with the Ottoman Empire. The differences between Shia and Sunni were not merely theological but also formed the basis for the establishment of clear political boundaries. The conflict between the Safavids and the Ottomans demonstrated that religion could serve a dual function: as a tool for internal integration and an instrument of external differentiation (McEvoy & O'Leary, 2013).

Nevertheless, the use of religion as a source of legitimacy is not without consequences. Efforts at religious homogenization have the potential to provoke resistance from groups that do not align with the state's official ideology. Furthermore, the politicization of religion can diminish its spiritual dimension because religion is used as a tool for the pursuit of power. It demonstrates that religious legitimacy is ambivalent—it can be a source of stability, but it can also trigger conflict, depending on how it is utilized.

Overall, the transformation of the Safavid Order into the Safavid state underscores that religious legitimacy is a key factor in the formation of pre-modern states. Religion functions not only as a belief system but also as a political instrument that shapes identity, establishes legitimacy, and regulates power relations. The Safavids serve as a concrete example of how religious institutions can evolve into organized political forces through the interplay of religious charisma, social networks, and the need for political legitimacy.

Therefore, studies on religious legitimacy in the Safavid transformation expand our understanding of the relationship between religion and power in the political history of Islam. It demonstrates that state formation is not determined solely by military or economic power, but also by the ability to create a system of meaning accepted as legitimate by society. Thus, religious legitimacy is key to explaining how power can be established, maintained, and developed within a complex historical context such as that experienced by the Safavid Dynasty.

DISCUSSION

The discussion of religious legitimacy in the transformation of the Safavid Dynasty underscores that religion functions not only as a belief system but also as a strategic instrument in the formation and consolidation of power. In this context, religious legitimacy proved to be a decisive factor enabling the shift from spiritually based charismatic authority to institutionalized political authority (Zeller & Chryssides, 2014). This process did not occur spontaneously, but rather through a complex interaction between religious charisma, the social networks of Sufi orders, and political conditions that supported the mobilization of religion-based power. Thus, these findings reinforce the assumption that in pre-modern societies, religion possesses the structural capacity to serve as the foundation of the state—especially when led by figures capable of translating religious legitimacy into concrete exercises of power.

When compared to previous studies, these findings align with perspectives that emphasize the importance of symbolic legitimacy in state formation. Various studies on the relationship between religion and power in Islamic history indicate that legitimacy is not only established through military strength but also through the construction of meaning that leads society to accept authority as legitimate. In the case of the Safavids, this is evident in the establishment of Twelver Shi'ism as the state ideology. This policy served

not only as a tool for internal integration but also as a means of external differentiation from other powers, such as the Ottoman Empire (Shepard, 2025). Thus, these findings not only confirm previous research but also expand upon it by demonstrating how religious legitimacy can be systematically institutionalized within a state structure to produce relatively stable power.

Furthermore, this analysis shows that religious legitimacy in the Safavid era evolved from a charismatic form to a more structured one. In the early stages, legitimacy rested on the religious charisma of the order's leader, which fostered personal loyalty. However, as the organization developed and the need for political stability grew, this legitimacy underwent a process of rationalization. It was institutionalized in the form of state institutions, laws, and administrative systems. In other words, religious legitimacy is dynamic—it does not remain static at the initial stage but continues to adapt in response to changes in the social and political context.

The implications of these findings are quite far-reaching. On the one hand, religion has proven capable of serving as an effective tool for social integration by fostering a collective identity and strong loyalty. On the other hand, however, the use of religion as a political instrument also harbors the potential for exclusion and conflict, particularly when the state imposes ideological homogeneity on a pluralistic society. Herein lies the ambivalent nature of religious legitimacy: it can be a source of stability as well as a source of tension, depending on how it is managed in political practice.

From a broader perspective, these findings are also relevant for understanding the relationship between religion and the state in the modern era. Although the Safavid period was a pre-modern context, the pattern demonstrated—namely, the integration of religion into political legitimacy—can still be found in various contemporary contexts (Shavandi, 2024). It suggests that modernization is not always synonymous with total secularization, but may involve the adaptation of religion's role within the state structure. Thus, this study helps explain how religion continues to hold an important position in modern politics, albeit in more complex and diverse forms.

Furthermore, this study opens up opportunities for comparative analysis with other cases, both within Islamic history and outside the Islamic world. Comparisons with models of political legitimacy in the Mughal Dynasty or even in the pre-modern European context can enrich our understanding of the varied uses of religion in state formation. Such an

approach allows us to see that religious legitimacy is not singular in nature, but is influenced by diverse social, cultural, and political factors.

Moving forward, there are several research directions that can be explored. First, a more in-depth study of the role of non-state actors—such as religious scholars and social groups—in shaping and maintaining religious legitimacy. Second, an analysis of how religious legitimacy transforms in the context of globalization and modernity, particularly regarding issues of democracy, pluralism, and human rights. Third, an interdisciplinary approach that combines history, sociology, and political science to understand the complexity of the relationship between religion and power more comprehensively. Thus, the study of religious legitimacy is not only historically significant but also holds strong relevance for understanding contemporary political dynamics.

CONCLUSION

Based on the overall discussion, the transformation of the Safavid Order into the Safavid Dynasty can be understood as a historical process that involved not only structural changes but also a fundamental shift in the sources of power's legitimacy. Authority, which originally rested on spiritual charisma—through the personal relationship between mursyid and disciple—evolved into institutionalized political authority. The expansion of the order's social network, coupled with regional political dynamics, drove this transformation until it reached its peak during the reign of Ismail I, who succeeded in consolidating all these potentials into a centralized state with religion as the primary basis of legitimacy. Furthermore, the designation of Twelver Shiism as the state's official ideology demonstrates that religion functions as more than just a system of beliefs. It serves as an effective political instrument for building collective identity, strengthening the authority of the ruling elite, and integrating a diverse society. In practice, the legitimacy of religion does not stop at symbolism. Still, it is institutionalized through state policies that strengthen the role of religious scholars, religious institutions, and a religion-based legal system.

On the other hand, religion also plays a role in shaping the Safavids' external identity, particularly in their relations with the Ottoman Empire, thereby clarifying their political position at the regional level. Thus, this study confirms that religious legitimacy is a key element in the formation and consolidation of the state, particularly in pre-modern contexts where the boundaries between religion and politics are not clearly defined. The

Safavid transformation demonstrates that religious institutions have the potential to evolve into organized political forces through a combination of religious charisma, social networks, and the need for the legitimization of power. Therefore, understanding the role of religion in the legitimization of power is not only important for interpreting Safavid history but also for explaining the dynamics of the relationship between religion and the state in a broader context.

REFERENCES

Abdurrahman, D. (2011). *Sejarah Peradaban Islam dari Klasik hingga Modern*. Ombak.

Adlini, M. N., Dinda, A. H., Yulinda, S., Chotimah, O., & Merliyana, S. J. (2022). Metode Penelitian Kualitatif Studi Pustaka. *Edumaspul: Jurnal Pendidikan, 6*(1), 974–980. https://doi.org/10.33487/edumaspul.v6i1.3394

Aji, A. C. (2022). Islam dalam Pusaran Konflik: Syiah dan Sunni Era Dinasti Safawi. *Journal of Integrative International Relations, 7*(1), 43–64. https://doi.org/10.15642/jiir.2022.7.1.43-64

Ananda, R. H., Jambak, M. R., & Kholil, A. (2024). Shah Ismail I: Pelopor Penyebaran Teologi Syi'ah di Iran (Kajian Historis). *Mukadimah: Jurnal Pendidikan, Sejarah, dan Ilmu-Ilmu Sosial, 8*(2), 583–594. https://doi.org/10.30743/mkd.v8i2.9515

Andhika, M. R., Hamdi, S., Jailani, J., Suroto, S., Ajidan, A., & Syahputra, R. (2024). Ulama, Madrasah dan Legitimasi Kekuasaan: Dinamika Otoritas Keilmuan dalam Sejarah Islam. *Moderation: Journal of Religious Harmony, 1*(2), 63–78. https://doi.org/10.47766/moderation.v1i2.4833

Braude, B. (2013). The success of religion as a source for compromise in divided empires: Ottoman and Safavid, past and present. In J. McEvoy & B. O'Leary (Eds.), *Power sharing in deeply divided places* (pp. 176–197). University of Pennsylvania Press.

Bromley, D. G. (2014). Charisma and leadership: Charisma and charismatic authority in new religious movements (NRMs). In G. D. Chryssides & B. E. Zeller (Eds.), *The Bloomsbury companion to new religious movements* (pp. 103–118). Bloomsbury Academic. https://doi.org/10.5040/9781472594518.ch-013

Creswell, J. W. (2012). *Research design: Pendekatan kualitatif, kuantitatif, dan mixed*. Pustaka Pelajar.

Driessen, M. D. (2014). *Religion and democratization: Framing religious and political identities in Muslim and Catholic societies*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199329700.001.0001

Fathurahman, O. (2016). *Tarekat dan Dinamika Sosial Keagamaan*. Prenadamedia.

Gentile, E. (2006). *Politics as religion* (G. Staunton, Trans.). Princeton University Press.

Iqbal, M. (2014). *Fiqh siyasah: Kontekstualisasi doktrin politik Islam*. Kencana.

Lapidus, I. M. (2014). *A history of Islamic societies* (3rd ed.). Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139048828

Moleong, L. J. (2014). *Metode Penelitian Kualitatif*. PT Remaja Rosdakarya.

Moleong, L. J. (2018). *Metodologi Penelitian Kualitatif*. Remaja Rosdakarya.

Muhamad, A. G., & Musa, N. Y. (2024). Perkembangan Tasawuf dan Tarekat di Negeri Kelantan: The development of Sufism and orders in Kelantan. *RABBANICA - Journal of Revealed Knowledge, 5*(2), 283–303. https://ejournals.kias.edu.my/index.php/rabbanica/article/view/345

Muhaimin, R., & Iskarim, M. (2024). Gerakan Keagamaan sebagai Pelopor Terbentuknya Dinasti Safawi dan Kemajuan Pendidikan Islam Persia. *Tarbiyah Islamiyah: Jurnal Ilmiah Pendidikan Agama Islam, 14*(1), 57–70. https://doi.org/10.18592/jtipai.v14i1.9740

Nawawi, N. (2025). The power of religious leaders to foster organizational commitment in Islamic boarding school. *Jurnal Cendekia Media Komunikasi Penelitian dan Pengembangan Pendidikan Islam, 17*(2), 604–619. https://doi.org/10.37850/cendekia.v17i02.1132

Newman, A. J. (2006). *Safavid Iran: Rebirth of a Persian empire*. I.B. Tauris.

Qoirunnisa, A., & Wahyuni, Y. S. (2025). Legitimasi Kekuasaan dalam Perspektif Max Weber pada Pemerintahan Kontemporer. *Journal Transformation of Mandalika, 6*(12), 592–598. https://doi.org/10.36312/jtm.v6i12.5801

Rezaei, M., & Moghaddam, H. D. (2020). A look at Shiite history in Iran from beginning to Safavid. *Journal of Social Studies, 6*(1), 1–7. http://www.jssjournal.com/fulltext/paper-07022020145633.pdf

Rosdiana, R., Darnanengsih, Hidayat, M. F., Hermanto, B., Rahmawati, & Syukur, S. (2025). Transformasi dan Integrasi Tiga Dinasti Islam: Kajian Komparatif Kerajaan Utsmani, Dinasti Safawi, dan Kekaisaran Mughal pada Abad Ke-18. *Transformasi: Jurnal Kepemimpinan & Pendidikan Islam, 8*(2), 53–63. https://doi.org/10.47945/transformasi.v8i2.2043

Rubaidi, R. (2021). Relasi Kuasa Ulama Sufi dan Negara dalam Kultur-Budaya Politik Indonesia. *Al-Izzah: Jurnal Hasil Penelitian, 16*(2), 70–86. https://doi.org/10.31332/ai.v0i0.3143

Safitri, N., & Amril, M. (2025). Kemajuan dan Kemunduran Dinasti Safawi di Persia. *Al-Ihda': Jurnal Pendidikan dan Pemikiran, 20*(2), 2119–2126. https://doi.org/10.55558/al-ihda.v20i2.293

Samudra, B., Sumanti, S. T., & Daulay, H. P. (2024). Studi Kebudayaan Islam pada Masa Dinasti Safawi di Persia. *Pendas: Jurnal Ilmiah Pendidikan Dasar, 9*(4), 328–338. https://doi.org/10.23969/jp.v9i04.21728

Sani, R. M. (2013). The symbolic expression of power and religion in the public buildings in Safavid Iran: A conceptual interpretation. *Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies, 6*(2), 199–218. https://doi.org/10.1353/isl.2013.0014

Savagheb, J. (2022). Assessing the rise of Safavid Shāh Ismā'il the I based on the theory of social deterrence. *Journal of Safavid Studies, 1*(3), 9–24. https://ssj.ui.ac.ir/article_28627.html

Savory, R. (1980). *Iran under the Safavids*. Cambridge University Press.

Seputra, H. R., & Suyatno, S. (2024). Kekuasaan sebagai Dasar Legitimasi Hukum dalam Pemikiran Filsafat Hukum. *AL-MIKRAJ Jurnal Studi Islam dan Humaniora, 5*(1), 1206–1217. https://doi.org/10.37680/almikraj.v5i01.6234

Shani, R. M. (2009). *An inquiry into Iranian architecture manifestation of identity, symbolism, and power in the Safavid's public buildings* [Master's thesis, Eastern Mediterranean University]. https://i-rep.emu.edu.tr/items/aee34c3f-331e-4009-a05e-b5c88954ed07

Shavandi, L. (2024). *Shi'itization of piety, Farsization of Shi'ism and regulation of the body in early modern Safavid Iran* [Master's thesis, Central European University]. https://www.etd.ceu.edu/2024/shavandi_leila.pdf

Shepard, A. M. (2025). *The consolidation of power in Shi'a Islam: Struggles for political legitimacy* [Doctoral dissertation, Indiana University]. ProQuest. https://www.proquest.com/openview/2acb0da5ab1a29a26ccc1c1efdc70521/1

Sofi, D. (2024). Peradaban Islam pada Masa Dinasti Safawi di Persia. *Jurnal An-Nur: Kajian Ilmu-Ilmu Pendidikan dan Keislaman, 10*(1), 9–21. https://journal.an-nur.ac.id/index.php/annur/article/view/2023

Sugiyono. (2019). *Metode Penelitian Pendidikan: Pendekatan Kuantitatif, Kualitatif, dan R&D*. Alfabeta.

Supriyadi, A. (2024). Daulah Safawi (1588–1629): Dinamika Politik, Kulturalisme, dan Identitas Nasional. *El Tarikh: Journal of History, Culture and Islamic Civilization, 5*(1), 41–50. https://doi.org/10.24042/00202452194300

Syarifah, H. I. (2024). Evolusi Sistem Pemerintahan Islam: Studi Kasus Kesultanan Syafawi di Persia. *Muta'allim: Jurnal Pendidikan Agama Islam, 3*(3), 116–138. https://doi.org/10.18860/mjpai.v3i3.10819

Syukur, A. (2014). Transformasi Gerakan Tarekat Syafawiyah dari Teologis ke Politis. *Kalam, 8*(1), 187–211. https://doi.org/10.24042/klm.v8i1.189

Syukur, M. A. (2014). *Tasawuf Sosial*. Pustaka Pelajar.

Weber, M. (1964). *The theory of social and economic organization*. Free Press.

Yatim, B. (2013). *Sejarah Peradaban Islam: Dirasah Islamiyah II*. RajaGrafindo Persada.

Zaprulkhan, Z. (2014). Relasi Agama dan Negara dalam Perspektif Islam. *Walisongo: Jurnal Penelitian Sosial Keagamaan, 22*(1), 105–132. https://doi.org/10.21580/ws.22.1.261

Zulharman, Z., Qohar, A., & Hardiyatullah, H. (2024). Transformasi Politik Islam Indonesia Menuju Sentralitas Perdamaian Internasional. *Al-Muqaronah: Jurnal Perbandingan Madzhab dan Hukum, 3*(2), 61–72. https://doi.org/10.59259/am.v3i2.229