

## Research Article

# Islamic Populism as Identity Politics: Dynamics and Challenges in Indonesian Democracy

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Daffa Adnanabin: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-6567-704X>**Abstract.**

Islamic populism has grown rapidly in Indonesia as one manifestation of political identity that plays an important role in the dynamics of democratic politics. This phenomenon is considered a form of dissatisfaction of some Muslim communities with political and economic structures that are considered unfair and elitist. Islamic populism emphasizes the dichotomy between the holy group (ummah) and marginalized groups that face the political elite who are considered corrupt and do not represent the interests of the majority. The purpose of this article is to examine the development of Islamic populism in the context of Indonesian democracy, with a focus on how religion is used as a tool for political mobilization and the formation of collective identity. This study uses qualitative and quantitative approaches involving the analysis of various political events, including the 2014 and 2019 General Elections, the 2017 Jakarta Gubernatorial Election, and social movements such as the 411 and 212 Islamic Defense Actions. Quantitative data from research institutions such as LSI, SMRC, and political indicators Indonesia are used to measure public perceptions of politics based on religious identity and show a significant increase in preferences for identity politics among the Muslim community. This article also discusses the main challenges faced by Indonesia in managing Islamic populism, in line with the principles of integrative and pluralistic democracy. The results of this study are expected to contribute to academic understanding and become a guide in responding to the dynamics of Islamic identity politics in the era of modern democracy in Indonesia.

**Keywords:** populism, Islam, democracy, social, pluralism

## 1. Introduction

Post-1998 reform, Indonesian democracy has undergone drastic changes with the opening of political participation from various groups, including religious groups. One of the most prominent phenomena in the last 20 years is the emergence and strengthening of Islamic populism as a form of identity politics [1]. This movement not only represents religious expression, but is also a response to social, economic, and political dissatisfaction. Islamic populism often plays a narrative about the people's struggle against

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political elites who are considered corrupt, secular, and do not represent the interests of the Muslim majority [2]. This phenomenon is clearly seen in various political events such as the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election, the 411 and 212 Islamic Defense Actions, and other elections [3]. The Islamic populist movement challenges Indonesia's integrative and pluralistic democracy [4]. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to analyze the development of Islamic populism as identity politics in the dynamics of Indonesian democracy post-reform, identify the social, economic, and political factors that drive its emergence, and examine its influence on social and political polarization in society. This research also aims to provide relevant political recommendations to strengthen Indonesian democracy, in order to build an integrative and pluralistic challenge to Islamic populism, and maintain social cohesion and national integrity [5].

## 2. Method

This study uses a mixed-method approach, consisting of:

### 2.1. Qualitative

Analysis of various important political events involving Islamic populism in Indonesia, including the General Election, Regional Elections, and mass actions such as the 411 and 212 Actions [6].

### 2.2. Quantitative

Analysis of survey data from trusted institutions such as:

2.2.1 Indonesian Survey Institute (LSI) in 2017 and 2019 [7].

2.2.2 Saiful Mujani Research and Consulting (SMRC) in 2018 and 2022 [8].

2.2.3 Indonesian Political Indicators in the 2017-2022 period [9].

In addition, an analysis of social media data from Drone Empiric was also carried out regarding the spread of religious narratives in the digital space [10]. The survey respondent population included Indonesian citizens in 34 provinces, with a sample size ranging from 1,200-2,000 respondents, and a margin of error of  $\pm 2.5-3\%$  [11].

### 3. Result and Discussion

In the framework of Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser's populism theory, Islamic populism in Indonesia adopts a dichotomy between "pure people" and "corrupt elites", thus strengthening the narrative of exclusivity

#### 3.1. The Development of Islamic Populism as Identity Politics in Indonesia

The results of the study show that Islamic populism grew rapidly after the 1998 reformation along with the opening of political space for various community groups. Islamic populism emerged as a form of identity politics that uses religion as a symbol of struggle against political elites who are considered unfair and corrupt [13]. This phenomenon is evident in events such as the 411 and 212 Actions, the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election, and the 2019 election [14]. LSI data (2019) shows that 48% of Indonesians consider religion to be the main factor in choosing political leaders [7].

#### 3.2. Factors Driving the Emergence of Islamic Populism

Some of the main factors driving the emergence of Islamic populism in Indonesia include dissatisfaction with government performance, economic inequality, political marginalization, and perceptions of injustice experienced by the Muslim majority group [15]. This sentiment is reinforced by the massive use of social media which allows the rapid and widespread spread of populist narratives [16]. The SMRC survey (2022) noted that 31% of respondents believe that Indonesia should only be led by a Muslim [8]. The Indonesian Political Indicator (2020) noted that 42% of the public supports the implementation of sharia law as the national legal system [9].

#### 3.3. The Impact of Islamic Populism on Social and Political Polarization

Islamic populism has had a significant impact on social and political polarization in Indonesia [17]. This polarization was evident in the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election, where religious sentiment became a central issue in the political contest [18]. The LSI

survey (2017) showed that 64.9% of Muslim respondents were unwilling to vote for non-Muslim leaders [7]. The Indonesian Political Indicator (2021) noted that 56.4% of Muslim respondents believed that leaders from other religions could threaten Muslims [9].

### **3.4. Challenges for Indonesian Democracy in Managing Islamic Populism**

Islamic populism is a major challenge for Indonesian democracy, especially in maintaining the principles of inclusivity, pluralism, and human rights [19]. The practice of exclusive religious-based identity politics often clashes with democratic values such as religious freedom and protection of minority rights [20]. The LSI survey (2019) showed that 47% of respondents agreed with restrictions on the construction of houses of worship for other religions in their environment [7]. SMRC (2022) noted that 36% of respondents stated that religious minority groups should not become public officials [8].

### **3.5. Dynamics of Polarization and the Role of Social Media in Islamic Populism**

Social media plays a significant role in the spread of Islamic populist narratives and identity politics [21]. During the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election, platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter became the main means of political mobilization [22]. Drone Empiric data (2017) noted that 60% of conversations on social media related to the election contained religious narratives [10]. The use of WhatsApp as a channel for the dissemination of political information increased from 34% in 2014 to 72% in 2019 [9]. The Ministry of Communication and Information (2020) noted a 48% increase in the spread of religious-themed hoaxes during the 2018-2019 political period [23].

## **4. Conclusion**

Islamic populism has rapidly developed as a phenomenon of identity politics in Indonesia after the 1998 Reformation. This populism emerged as a response to social, economic, and political dissatisfaction felt by segments of the Muslim community toward the government and political elites, who are perceived as unjust, corrupt, and unrepresentative of the interests of the Muslim majority [1,5].

Research indicates that the main driving factors of Islamic populism are dissatisfaction with government performance, economic inequality, political marginalization, and perceptions of injustice among Muslims [15,16]. Quantitative data from various surveys (LSI, SMRC, Indonesian Political Indicators) show an increasing public preference for politics based on religious identity, including rejection of leadership from other religious groups and support for the implementation of sharia-based law [7-9].

Islamic populism also intensifies social and political polarization in Indonesia, as demonstrated during the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election and the 2019 general election [14,18]. This polarization weakens social cohesion, increases the potential for horizontal conflicts, and threatens national integration as well as the quality of inclusive and pluralistic democracy [19,20].

In addition, social media plays a major role in amplifying the narrative of Islamic populism and identity politics, through the dissemination of hate speech, hoaxes, and propaganda that deepen societal divisions [21,22]. The challenge for Indonesian democracy going forward is how to manage religious diversity and political identities in a fair and inclusive manner, while strengthening democratic values, human rights, and the protection of minority groups [19,20,23].

Collective efforts are required from the government, civil society, and political actors to build an integrative, pluralistic, and inclusive Indonesian democracy. Strengthening political education based on the values of tolerance, implementing more effective social media regulations, and adopting affirmative policies to promote inclusivity are strategic steps to reduce the negative impacts of Islamic populism and safeguard the integrity of Indonesia's democracy [23].

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