ISLAM AS POPULIST CURRENCY:
The Indonesian Case of Religious Nationalism and the Quest for Power

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KEYWORD	ABSTRACT
Islam, Populism, Symbolic capital, Religious nationalism, Political discourse	*This article investigates the instrumentalization of Islam as a populist currency in Indonesia's contemporary political landscape. Through a critical discourse analysis of the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election and the 2019 presidential campaign, the study examines how political and religious actors mobilize Islamic narratives, symbols, and emotional appeals to construct the moral superiority of "the people" and delegitimize their opponents. It argues that Islam functions not merely as a system of belief, but as symbolic capital—used strategically to moralize authority, forge collective identity, and exclude ideological and religious "others." The findings reveal how religious populism in Indonesia has contributed to the erosion of pluralist values and the consolidation of exclusionary politics. The article offers a conceptual proposition of "Islam as populist currency" to understand this phenomenon, and reflects on its implications for democracy, tolerance, and civil society in the world's largest Muslim-majority democracy.*

INTRODUCTION

In the past decade, Indonesia—often hailed as the world's largest Muslim democracy—has witnessed an alarming convergence between populist politics and religious symbolism, particularly Islam (Margiansyah, 2019). While religion has always played a role in Indonesian public life, recent political developments have revealed an intensified trend of instrumentalizing Islam as a tool of political legitimacy, moral authority, and social mobilization (Barton et al., 2021; Margiansyah, 2019). The most notable case was the 2016–2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election, where blasphemy allegations against then-governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok) ignited mass protests and redefined the contours of religious-political engagement in the country (Fadhlan & Azizah, 2022; Rai & Mahadian, 2017). This moment marked a broader shift: Islam was no longer merely a cultural or ethical foundation, but a strategic currency—a populist instrument that can be traded, mobilized, and weaponized in the contest for power.

The rise of Islamic populism in Indonesia has been marked by the increasingly pervasive use of moral binaries that divide society into antagonistic camps: "us" versus "them," "the faithful" versus "the blasphemers," and "the ummah" versus "liberal elites." These dichotomies are not merely rhetorical; they function as discursive technologies that simplify complex political realities into emotionally resonant moral judgments (Fahmi, 2018; Malik, 2018; Wijanarko, 2021). By constructing the Muslim majority as a homogenous moral community under threat, populist actors are able to galvanize collective anxiety, mobilize resentment, and legitimize exclusionary claims to authority.

This process is facilitated by the fusion of religious discourse with nationalist-populist rhetoric, a synthesis that enables political actors—from conservative clerics to presidential contenders—to appropriate religious symbols as emblems of national authenticity. Figures such as Habib Rizieq Shihab and the 212 movement leadership, for instance, have consistently portrayed themselves as defenders of both *agama dan bangsa*, blurring the line between piety and patriotism (Imamah, 2017; Laksana et al., 2020). Similarly, political elites have co-opted religious language to amplify their populist appeal, portraying themselves as champions of the oppressed Muslim majority (*umat tertindas*) against secular, liberal, and foreign-aligned elites.

As a consequence, Islam has become deeply embedded in the discourses of national belonging, moral purity, and political entitlement. Citizenship and legitimacy are increasingly tethered to one's perceived alignment with Islamic norms and clerical authority (Hanafi & Sofiandi, 2018; Jayanto, 2019). Public figures who fail to perform religious piety—or worse, who question the political use of Islam—are often labeled as *anti-Islam*, *pro-kafir*, or *komprador asing*. This narrowing of acceptable political subjectivity erodes the pluralist foundations of Indonesian democracy by casting ideological, ethnic, and religious minorities as perpetual outsiders to the imagined Islamic nation.

Moreover, the sacralization of political discourse has undermined civil liberties, particularly the rights to dissent, religious freedom, and minority protection. Legal instruments such as the blasphemy law (UU No. 1/PNPS/1965) and ITE Law have been used selectively to silence critics of dominant religious narratives, producing a chilling effect on open public debate (Al, 2022; Halili, 2021; Supriyadi et al., 2024). Activists, religious minorities, and even moderate Muslims who call for tolerance or challenge populist orthodoxy risk legal persecution, social ostracization, or digital harassment.

In this environment, democratic pluralism is not merely weakened—it is delegitimized. Democracy, once understood as a system of negotiation among diverse interests, is reframed as a vehicle for restoring *Islamic moral order*. The political field becomes a battleground for religious authenticity, where elections are framed as a referendum on faith, and governance is judged not by constitutional performance, but by proximity to religious conservatism (Kirana & Garadian, 2020; Rudiawarni et al., 2022).

Despite an expanding body of scholarship on populism and political Islam, the analytical landscape remains uneven and incomplete. Much of the existing literature tends to treat populism and religion as parallel yet distinct phenomena, often neglecting their complex interrelations. Moreover, a significant portion of these studies is predominantly anchored in Christian-majority settings, particularly in Western contexts such as Europe and the United States, where the historical trajectories and socio-political dynamics differ markedly from those in Muslim-majority societies (Faiz et al., 2023; Wildan & Witriani, 2021). This Euro-American focus limits the applicability of prevailing theoretical frameworks to non-Western contexts, where religion may play divergent roles in political mobilization and identity formation.

In contrast, the Asia-Pacific region, and Indonesia specifically—the world's largest Muslim-majority democracy—presents a fertile yet underexplored terrain for examining the confluence of populism and Islamic political discourse (Hefner, 2009, 2011). Indonesia's unique socio-religious fabric, marked by pluralism, local traditions, and a constitutional commitment to religious diversity, challenges reductive assumptions about Islam's political functions. While recent studies, including those by Yilmaz & Morieson, (2023), have made important strides in mapping religious populism across Asian contexts, there remains a critical gap in understanding how Islam operates beyond mere ideology or collective identity.

Islam, in this context, functions as a form of "political currency"—a versatile and negotiable resource that political actors strategically deploy to assert authenticity, construct moral legitimacy, and delegitimize opponents. This metaphor of currency captures the transactional and performative

dimensions of religion in the political marketplace, where competing claims over the "true" representation of Islam become a battleground for power (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2013). Such an approach demands a nuanced interrogation of the ways Islamic symbols, narratives, and institutions are mobilized not simply to express faith, but to engage in sophisticated political strategies aimed at capturing the moral imagination of "the people."

Understanding Islamic populism through this lens opens new avenues for analyzing how religious nationalism in Indonesia is intricately tied to broader struggles over authority, sovereignty, and democratic legitimacy. It pushes scholars to reconsider Islam's role in political life—not merely as a static identity marker, but as a dynamic and commodified resource embedded in the quest for power within a pluralistic yet deeply religious society (Parekh, 2001).

This article seeks to address that gap by proposing a new lens: understanding Islam as a populist currency in contemporary Indonesian politics. By examining how religious narratives, symbols, and emotions are strategically deployed in political contests—especially in the post-Ahok, post-2014 context—this study explores how Islam is used to build legitimacy, craft populist identities, and justify exclusionary politics. The article argues that in Indonesia, Islam is increasingly treated as a flexible symbolic resource, capable of uniting mass sentiment, policing morality, and elevating leaders as "defenders of the faith." Rather than viewing religion as merely ideological substance, this paper foregrounds its transactional and performative dimensions in populist politics.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Populism as a "Thin-Centered" Ideology

Populism has been extensively theorized as a "thin-centered" ideology (Mudde, 2007), characterized by its minimalist core framework that fundamentally divides society into two morally opposed camps: "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite." This stark binary worldview simplifies complex social realities into a Manichean struggle, where the legitimacy of political authority hinges on the populist claim to represent the authentic voice of "the people." Crucially, populism's thin-centered nature means it lacks a comprehensive ideological substance by itself, rendering it inherently flexible and adaptable. This flexibility enables populism to attach itself selectively to various "thicker" ideologies—such as nationalism, socialism, or religion—thereby producing a more substantive and emotionally resonant ideological project that can mobilize diverse constituencies (Mudde, 2013).

The pragmatic fusion between populism and these thicker ideologies is not accidental but strategic: by anchoring itself to well-established socio-political narratives, populist movements enhance their appeal and resonance within particular historical and cultural contexts. As a result, populism is far from ideologically homogenous; instead, it acts as a "chameleon" that absorbs and reinterprets local sociocultural resources to construct the identity of "the people" and delineate their perceived enemies. These enemies—often cast as corrupt elites, foreign actors, or marginalized groups—are portrayed not only as political adversaries but as existential threats to the moral and cultural fabric of society.

This context-dependent redefinition of "the people" is critical to understanding the variegated manifestations of populism globally. In Indonesia, for instance, the boundaries of "the people" are often drawn through religious and ethnic lines, where Islam frequently serves as a key referential marker. Populist actors thus deploy Islamic symbolism and discourse to both unify their base and exclude others, leveraging shared religious identity as a potent tool of political mobilization (Morieson, 2023). This process reveals how populism operates not merely as a political style but as an ideological strategy that intricately intertwines with locally embedded cultural meanings, enabling populist leaders to cultivate affective bonds and moral legitimacy among their supporters.

In its performative dimension, populism operates as much through emotional and symbolic

mobilization as through rational-ideological argumentation. It actively constructs narratives of crisis and rupture, portraying society as being in a state of emergency that demands urgent political intervention. This sense of crisis is not merely descriptive but is performatively enacted to elicit powerful emotions such as anger, resentment, and fear—affects that bind the collective "people" together in opposition to a vilified "elite." Through this emotional charge, populism forges a shared identity, creating a sense of belonging among those who perceive themselves as marginalized or excluded from the existing power structures.

Ernesto Laclau's seminal conceptualization(Laclau, 2015) reframes populism beyond a mere political tactic into a fundamental logic of articulation. According to Laclau, populism does not originate solely from fixed ideological content but rather from the strategic deployment of empty signifiers—political symbols or concepts whose meanings are fluid and contingent (Smith, 2012). These empty signifiers become nodes around which diverse social demands and grievances coalesce into an equivalential chain, linking heterogeneous groups under a common political identity. In other words, populism is the process by which disparate social actors are unified into a collective political subject through the construction of equivalence between their demands, despite their differences.

This logic of articulation is crucial for understanding how populist movements create new political identities and reconfigure social antagonisms. The emptiness of the signifiers—such as "the people," "justice," or "sovereignty"—allows for their polyvalent appropriation, making populist discourse highly adaptable and context-sensitive. The meanings of these signifiers are not predetermined but are continuously negotiated and contested within the populist narrative, enabling leaders to tailor their messages to resonate with diverse constituencies (Colpani, 2022; Norris, 2006).

In the Indonesian context, this performative dimension of populism is vividly illustrated by the way Islamic references function as empty signifiers that are imbued with varying meanings depending on political exigencies. Islamic symbols and rhetoric become malleable tools to articulate grievances, mobilize affective attachments, and forge a sense of political community among supporters. This dynamic underscores that populism's power lies not only in what it claims but in how it performs and enacts political identities, transforming social discontent into collective political action.

Religious Populism and the Construction of Moral Community

When populism intersects with religion, it gives rise to a distinct variant often termed religious populism—a discursive formation that strategically harnesses religious language, symbols, and values to demarcate "the people" from "the others." Unlike secular populism, which typically pits the people against a corrupt political elite, religious populism complicates this binary by adding layers of sacredness and moral absolutism. Religious populists frame their political struggle not merely as a contest for power but as a sacred mission or divine mandate, casting themselves as defenders of a transcendent moral order under threat from both secular elites and religious "outsiders" or heretics. This sacralization of political conflict constructs a moral hierarchy that claims legitimacy through appeals to divine authority, often invoking sacred texts, religious traditions, or charismatic religious leadership to validate their cause (Yilmaz & Morieson, 2022).

Within these frameworks, religion assumes multifaceted and interconnected roles that are critical to the logic and effectiveness of religious populism. First, religion functions definitionally as the core identity marker of "the people," distinguishing the in-group not only in political terms but in ontological and existential dimensions. Religious identity becomes the primary axis around which collective belonging is constructed, creating a tightly knit community that is simultaneously spiritual and political. This identity-bound conception of the people deepens the emotional resonance of populist appeals by linking political participation to faith and moral duty.

Second, religion plays a legitimizing role by providing a foundation for authority that transcends mundane political claims. Leaders and movements invoke divine will, sacred law, or religious tradition to justify their right to govern and to delegitimize opponents as not only politically illegitimate but spiritually deviant. This invocation of sacred legitimacy often intensifies the stakes of political contestation, framing opposition as both a political betrayal and a sin against divine order.

Third, religion acts as a powerful mobilizing resource by serving as a shared reservoir of symbols, rituals, and narratives that galvanize collective action. The emotional and symbolic potency of religion fuels solidarity and commitment among supporters, enabling religious populists to transform abstract political messages into lived experiences of communal struggle and hope. Ritual practices, religious festivals, and scriptural references become vehicles through which political identities are performed and reinforced, embedding political mobilization within the rhythm of religious life.

In the Indonesian context, this dynamic interplay between religion and populism is particularly salient. Islamic references—ranging from Quranic verses to invocation of Islamic moral values—are often deployed not only to articulate political grievances but to construct a moral-political community that claims exclusive custodianship over the nation's soul. Consequently, religious populism in Indonesia must be understood not simply as a political tactic but as a comprehensive socio-political phenomenon where religion functions simultaneously as identity, legitimacy, and mobilization, shaping both the form and content of populist contestation.

Islam as Populist Currency: A Conceptual Proposition

This paper introduces the concept of "Islam as populist currency" to capture the multifaceted and strategic ways in which Islam is not merely a faith or belief system, but a dynamic resource actively traded, circulated, and instrumentalized within the arena of populist politics. Drawing inspiration from Pierre Bourdieu's theory of symbolic capital, which conceptualizes certain cultural and social assets as forms of power convertible into political influence, we propose understanding Islam as a form of symbolic-political capital. This conceptualization moves beyond conventional approaches that treat religion solely as ideology or identity, instead highlighting its performative and transactional dimensions in political struggles.

Islam as populist currency operates through several interconnected mechanisms. First, it serves to authenticate a political actor's claim to legitimately represent "the people." By invoking Islamic symbols, narratives, and moral authority, populist leaders position themselves as the true custodians of the community's values, thereby distinguishing themselves from rivals who are portrayed as alien, corrupt, or insufficiently pious. This authentication process is critical in populism, where the legitimacy of representation hinges on embodying the moral will of "the people."

Second, Islam is deployed to delegitimize opponents by framing them as immoral, secular, or even anti-Islamic forces that threaten the social and religious fabric of the nation. This delegitimization is not merely a political attack but a moral condemnation that seeks to exclude adversaries from the political community and justify their marginalization or disqualification. The invocation of religious language thus heightens political antagonism by intertwining it with existential and spiritual stakes.

Third, Islam functions as a potent tool to transform religious emotions—including fear, pride, and grievance—into collective political action. These emotions are deeply embedded in the religious imagination and become catalysts for mobilization when channelled through populist narratives. The symbolic resonance of Islamic motifs intensifies affective engagement, fostering a sense of urgency and collective purpose among supporters.

Finally, Islam as populist currency enables the construction of a collective identity grounded

in religious-nationalist narratives. This identity is crafted through stories and symbols that fuse Islamic values with nationalist aspirations, creating a powerful sense of belonging that transcends mere political affiliation. Such narratives help to unify disparate social groups under a common banner, reinforcing social cohesion while delineating boundaries against perceived internal and external enemies.

By framing Islam as a form of populist currency, this paper advances a more nuanced understanding of the interplay between religion and populism in Indonesia. It underscores how religious symbols and sentiments are not fixed or purely spiritual phenomena but are actively negotiated and commodified within political struggles for power and legitimacy in a deeply pluralistic society. This perspective allows us to move beyond conventional analyses that see Islam as ideology or identity, and instead focus on its performative, transactional, and rhetorical uses within political discourse.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine how Islam functions as a form of populist currency in contemporary Indonesian political discourse. The approach is suitable for unpacking the symbolic, rhetorical, and strategic dimensions of religious language used by political actors, religious groups, and the media. CDA enables the analysis of how power, ideology, and identity are constructed and reproduced through language in particular socio-political contexts (Baumgarten & Schröter, 2017; Pantao, 2021; van Dijk, 2006).

The research is interpretive in nature and falls within the scope of critical constructivism, which assumes that meaning is socially and discursively constructed. The study does not aim to measure frequency or quantify attitudes, but to uncover the underlying logics and power structures embedded in religious populist narratives. This study uses purposive document analysis focusing on three main types of data: Political Speeches and Public Statements; By key figures such as President Joko Widodo, Prabowo Subianto, and Islamic populist leaders (e.g., Habib Rizieq Shihab, alumni 212, and others) during election cycles (2014, 2017, and 2019); Media Reports and News Articles, Collected from Indonesian mainstream outlets (Kompas, Tempo, Republika, Detik, CNN Indonesia) and alternative Islamic media (Voa-Islam, Islampos, Arrahmah.net) during key political moments; and Social Media and Online Discourse; Analysis of hashtags, memes, videos, and online campaigns that show religious populist framing (e.g., #BelaIslam, #GantiPresiden2019, #NKRIBersyariah).

Data were analyzed thematically using Fairclough's three-dimensional model of discourse: Textual analysis: Examining vocabulary, metaphors, emotional appeals, and religious symbols; Discursive practice: Understanding how the discourse is produced, circulated, and consumed (e.g., media amplification, religious mobilization); and Social practice: Situating discourse within broader structures of power, religion, and populism in Indonesia. To ensure validity, triangulation was employed across various sources, and interpretive rigor was maintained by situating findings within theoretical frameworks on populism and religious nationalism.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Islam and Political Power in Indonesia: *From the New Order to the Post-Reformasi Era*

The relationship between Islam and political power in Indonesia has long been characterized by a complex, often ambivalent, interplay shaped by shifting dynamics of co-optation, marginalization, accommodation, and instrumentalization. This historical trajectory is essential to grasp if we are to understand how Islam today functions not merely as a religion or identity marker, but as a potent form of political currency within the contemporary populist landscape (Margiansyah, 2019). Over time, Islam's political role in Indonesia has oscillated between periods of repression and strategic accommodation, reflecting the state's attempts to both harness and contain its influence in

a pluralistic society marked by diverse religious and ethnic groups (A. E. Putra, 2020).

During the New Order era (1966–1998) under Suharto, this ambivalence was particularly pronounced. The regime officially recognized Islam as the faith of the majority population, acknowledging its deep-rooted social and cultural significance (Setiyawan & Budiman, 2019). However, Suharto's government simultaneously viewed political Islam as a potential source of fragmentation and instability, fearing that autonomous Islamic political forces could challenge the centralized authority and threaten the project of nation-building under a unified national ideology. Consequently, the state employed a policy of repression combined with selective co-optation to neutralize Islamist political aspirations.

One of the most salient strategies was the forced fusion of Islamic political parties into the United Development Party (Partai Persatuan Pembangunan, PPP), effectively depoliticizing Islam by limiting its expression within tightly controlled institutional frameworks. This fusion was less a genuine political compromise and more a method to fragment Islamic political power, undermining its capacity to act as an independent actor. Concurrently, the regime vigorously promoted Pancasila— the state ideology emphasizing national unity, religious pluralism, and civic nationalism—as the exclusive ideological foundation for all political organizations. This ideological monopoly marginalized Islamist agendas, compelling Islamic groups to conform to a secular-nationalist discourse or face political exclusion (Arizal, 2022).

Yet, this state-imposed marginalization did not eradicate Islam's political relevance; rather, it transformed the ways in which Islamic actors engaged with the state and society. Many Islamic groups adapted by shifting towards social and cultural spheres, building grassroots networks, and embedding Islamic values within civil society. This period of controlled political Islam laid important groundwork for later reconfigurations, illustrating how Islam in Indonesia has been alternately suppressed and instrumentalized depending on shifting power calculations.

Understanding these historical dynamics of co-optation and repression during the New Order is crucial to contextualize contemporary phenomena where Islam resurfaces as a strategic political currency. Today, populist actors draw upon this legacy, leveraging Islamic symbols and sentiments not only to claim moral authenticity but to mobilize broad constituencies in the pursuit of political power. This continuity underscores the enduring salience of Islam in Indonesia's political field, shaped by historical constraints but also by the adaptive strategies of both state and religious actors.

However, in the 1990s, as Suharto's regime faced mounting legitimacy crises fueled by prolonged economic uncertainty and growing popular discontent, the government began to recalibrate its stance toward Islam, increasingly courting Muslim support as a strategic necessity. This late-stage Islamic turn marked a significant departure from earlier ambivalence and repression, signaling a gradual rehabilitation of Islam—not just as a cultural identity tolerated by the state, but as a valuable political asset to be leveraged for regime survival. Central to this strategy was the establishment of the Indonesian Association of Muslim Intellectuals (Ikatan Cendekiawan Muslim Indonesia, ICMI), which served as a state-sanctioned forum to channel Islamic intellectual energies in ways that aligned with government interests (Taufikurrahman & Hidayat, 2020). Simultaneously, the regime expanded support for Islamic banking institutions and nurtured relationships with prominent Islamic figures, thereby embedding Islam more visibly into the political economy and governance structures.

This pragmatic accommodation during the twilight of the New Order prefigured the profound shifts that would follow the regime's collapse in 1998. The Reformasi era inaugurated a period of religious liberalization and political pluralism unprecedented in Indonesia's history, fundamentally reshaping the Islam–state relationship (Agustino & Agus Yusoff, 2014). The political opening enabled the resurgence of Islamic parties across a broad ideological spectrum. On one end, moderate parties such as the National Awakening Party (Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa, PKB) and the National

Mandate Party (Partai Amanat Nasional, PAN) sought to blend Islamic values with democratic pluralism and national integration. On the other, more conservative and Islamist parties like the Prosperous Justice Party (Partai Keadilan Sejahtera, PKS) and the Crescent Star Party (Partai Bulan Bintang, PBB) advocated for a stronger public role for Islam, sometimes pushing for policies closer to Islamic law and identity politics.

Beyond party politics, the Reformasi era also witnessed an explosion of Islamic civil society actors, including educational institutions, media outlets, and social organizations. This flourishing public sphere diversified the expression of Islamic identity and political activism, creating vibrant yet fragmented religious landscapes marked by competing interpretations of Islam's role in public life. The newfound freedom enabled various Islamic groups to articulate distinct political and theological visions, ranging from progressive reformist to hardline conservative positions. While this pluralism enriched Indonesia's democratic culture, it also introduced new fault lines within the Muslim community and complicated the task of constructing a unified Islamic political front.

Taken together, these developments illustrate how Islam in post-New Order Indonesia evolved from a largely marginalized or co-opted entity into a dynamic and contested political force. The Reformasi era's religious liberalization both empowered Islamic actors and intensified intra-religious competition, setting the stage for the complex ways in which Islam is deployed today—as both a moral resource and a strategic populist currency—in Indonesia's multifaceted political arena.

During the Reformasi period (1998–2014), Islam's political role remained complex but had not yet fully transformed into an overtly populist tool. Islamic identity was more often negotiated and performed as a marker of personal piety, communal morality, and social respectability than explicitly instrumentalized to draw rigid dichotomies of "us" versus "them." This period saw political leaders such as Abdurrahman Wahid (commonly known as Gus Dur) and Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY) embodying a moderate and pluralist approach to governance. Both presidents sought to balance the accommodation of Islamic interests with a firm commitment to Indonesia's foundational pluralism and national unity, promoting religious tolerance as a core state value. Under their leadership, Islam functioned largely as a source of moral guidance and identity affirmation rather than as a divisive political weapon.

However, this relative moderation began to erode during the second decade of the 21st century, culminating in a new political configuration that saw the rise of religious populism and the instrumentalization of Islam for political gain. The 2014 presidential election marked a critical inflection point in this transformation. Islamist political forces and mass mobilizations employing religious narratives surged in prominence, signaling a shift in the ways Islam was deployed within Indonesia's electoral and public spheres. This trend became even more pronounced during the highly contentious 2016–2017 blasphemy controversy surrounding Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, popularly known as Ahok, the then-governor of Jakarta. The campaign against Ahok galvanized large segments of the Muslim population through a rhetoric that framed the conflict as a moral and religious struggle between "the faithful people" and corrupt, secular, or minority "others."

In this post-2014 context, Islam ceased to be merely one identity among many and instead increasingly functioned as a potent populist currency. It was used strategically to construct a binary moral order, where "the people" were defined not only by their religious belonging but also by their purported ethical purity, while opponents were delegitimized as morally deficient, secular, or antagonistic to Islamic values. This process entailed the explicit politicization of religious symbols, rituals, and grievances, transforming them into tools for political mobilization, social division, and the consolidation of power. Religious populism in Indonesia thus reflects a broader global phenomenon where religion is instrumentalized to channel popular discontent, sharpen identity boundaries, and contest political authority.

This shift from negotiated religious identity to instrumentalized religious populism signals a

critical evolution in the Indonesian political landscape. It underscores how Islam, embedded historically in the nation's socio-political fabric, can be reactivated as a divisive and mobilizing force under conditions of political competition and uncertainty. Understanding this transition is essential for analyzing contemporary struggles over nationalism, identity, and power in Indonesia's democratic era.

The Ahok blasphemy case represented a watershed moment in Indonesia's contemporary political landscape, crystallizing the potent fusion of religion and populism into a formidable political force. What initially began as a seemingly localized religious controversy rapidly escalated into a nationwide political spectacle, revealing how Islamic symbols, narratives, and collective emotions could be skillfully mobilized and transformed into powerful political capital. The case demonstrated how religious grievances, when articulated through moralistic language and mass mobilization, transcend purely theological concerns and become embedded within broader struggles over political legitimacy and power.

Central to this transformation was the emergence of groups such as the Islamic Defenders Front (Front Pembela Islam, FPI) and networks of participants from the 212 rally—an enormous mass protest held in December 2016 that galvanized widespread attention. These actors deftly blended a rhetoric of moral urgency rooted in Islamic piety with populist narratives of outrage against alleged corrupt elites, minority groups, and "anti-Islamic" forces. By framing their movement as a sacred defense of the ummah—the global Muslim community—against perceived internal and external threats, they constructed a powerful collective identity predicated on victimhood and moral righteousness.

This framing not only heightened political polarization but also redefined the boundaries of "the people" in explicitly religious terms, setting up clear dichotomies between the "pious masses" and their opponents, who were cast as illegitimate, immoral, or unpatriotic. The case exposed how Islam, as symbolic-political capital, could be strategically deployed to delegitimize political rivals, mobilize popular support, and reshape the political agenda around questions of religious identity and morality. In this way, the Ahok controversy exemplifies the broader dynamics of religious populism in Indonesia, where faith becomes a contested resource in the quest for political power.

Under President Joko Widodo, we see a paradox: while his administration has cracked down on some Islamist organizations, it has also appropriated Islamic symbolism for political legitimacy—courting NU, showcasing religious ceremonies, and backing legislation that aligns with conservative moral values. This illustrates how Islam operates as a currency across political factions: by opposition actors to challenge power, and by incumbents to stabilize authority through symbolic accommodation.

Populist Construction of "the Ummah" and Moral Others: *The Case of Pilkada DKI 2017 and #2019GantiPresiden*

The Jakarta gubernatorial election of 2017 and the subsequent 2019 national presidential campaign represent two pivotal junctures in the trajectory of Islamic populism in post-Reformasi Indonesia. In both episodes, Islam was not merely evoked as a theological belief system or cultural identity, but was strategically mobilized as populist currency—a potent symbolic and emotional reservoir from which political actors could draw legitimacy, shape public discourse, and galvanize mass mobilization (Argenti, 2019). This process involved the populist reconfiguration of *"the ummah"* as a morally unified collective, positioned in stark contrast to a vilified set of Others portrayed as un-Islamic, corrupt, or elitist.

The controversy surrounding Basuki Tjahaja Purnama—widely known as Ahok—was a turning point in the political instrumentalization of Islam (Prayogi, 2019). As a Christian of Chinese descent who assumed Jakarta's governorship following Joko Widodo's ascent to the presidency in 2014, Ahok initially garnered support for his technocratic style, strong anti-corruption stance, and

commitment to urban development. However, his reference to Qur'anic verse *al-Mā'idah* 51 in a 2016 speech—interpreted by opponents as implying that voters were being misled by religious leaders—provided the spark that ignited a populist firestorm (Effendi & Syafrudin, 2020).

What might have remained a minor political misstep was rapidly reframed into a discourse of blasphemy, triggering large-scale outrage fueled by religious sentiment. Crucially, this outrage was not spontaneous; it was carefully curated, amplified, and channeled by a constellation of Islamic populist actors, including the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), conservative ulema networks, and emerging digital influencers within the #AksiBelaIslam and 212 movement (Hamudy, 2019). These actors effectively transformed the issue into a moral drama, portraying Ahok not merely as a political opponent, but as an existential threat to Islam and the dignity of the Muslim majority.

In this populist framing, the *ummah* was constructed as a morally homogeneous group under siege—not only by a blaspheming governor, but by the broader secular-liberal elite perceived as complicit in tolerating or defending him. The mobilization of this identity was reinforced by emotionally charged rhetoric, Qur'anic symbolism, mass rallies, and viral social media campaigns. Blasphemy thus became a mobilizing device—a powerful narrative hook that linked religious piety to political action, moral panic to electoral strategy, and theological grievance to populist revolt (Badrun, 2019).

By elevating the controversy into a binary struggle between "the defenders of Islam" and "the enemies of the faith," Islamic populists redefined the terrain of political competition in deeply moralistic terms. The Ahok case was less about legal interpretations of blasphemy and more about articulating a populist imaginary in which Islam, nationhood, and popular sovereignty were fused into a singular moral community—a community from which ethnic and religious minorities, liberal pluralists, and establishment elites were implicitly or explicitly excluded (Badrun, 2019).

Islamist organizations such as the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), supported by conservative preachers and populist influencers, mobilized massive protests under the slogan "Aksi Bela Islam" (Ahyar & Alfitri, 2019). These movements were framed as a moral obligation of the Muslim majority to protect their religion, but beneath the religious fervor lay a distinct populist logic: "The Ummah" was constructed as the morally righteous people; Ahok was cast as the corrupt, infidel elite—a symbol of Chinese-Christian domination; and The state and political establishment were accused of conspiring with "enemies of Islam."

This populist narrative relied heavily on religious affect—grievance, fear, and outrage—to build a sense of existential threat and collective Islamic solidarity. The blasphemy charge became not just a legal issue, but a symbolic test of loyalty to Islam and national identity. The protests, especially the massive 212 Rally, redefined public space as Islamic moral space, and showcased the effectiveness of Islam as a political currency (Burhani, 2016).

The *#2019GantiPresiden* ("Change the President 2019") movement marked a significant continuation—and escalation—of Islamic populism in Indonesia, building directly on the momentum of the 212 movement and the Ahok blasphemy controversy. If the 2016–2017 mobilizations presented Islam as a sacred boundary under threat from within (embodied in a non-Muslim political figure accused of blasphemy), the *#2019GantiPresiden* campaign reframed Islam as a moral imperative to resist an entire regime that was seen as betraying the interests of the Muslim majority (Rachmadi & Budianto, 2020).

While initially styled as a civil society campaign unaffiliated with formal party structures, *#2019GantiPresiden* quickly became a symbolic vehicle for political opposition, particularly against the administration of President Joko Widodo (Jokowi). Public figures like Neno Warisman, Mardani Ali Sera, and eventually Prabowo Subianto emerged as central voices, articulating a narrative in which the electoral contest of 2019 was not merely a democratic exercise but a moral battle. In this discourse, voting against Jokowi became framed as a religious duty—an act of faith and solidarity with

the ummah (Fadillah & Chang, 2021; H. P. Putra & Triyono, 2018).

The movement drew heavily from the symbolic and emotional reservoir created by the 212 demonstrations. Islamic songs and prayers were fused with political slogans; religious imagery was printed on T-shirts, banners, and social media memes; and Islamic language was used to define the opposition as not just political dissenters but the true defenders of divine justice. Islam, in this populist context, served as a *moral language* that gave legitimacy to political anger and a sense of sacred mission to otherwise partisan goals (Hardianto, 2020).

Islam thus functioned as populist currency in its fullest sense: not only as a marker of authenticity and piety, but also as a tool to delegitimize the ruling regime. The Jokowi administration was not simply portrayed as inefficient or corrupt, but as hostile—or at best indifferent—to Islamic values and the needs of the Muslim majority. Loyalty to the incumbent was equated with betrayal of the ummah, while dissent was celebrated as religious resistance.

This form of populist discourse resonated particularly with Islamist groups, conservative constituencies, and economically disenfranchised populations who felt alienated by Jokowi's technocratic and development-driven governance. In uniting these diverse actors under a shared religious-nationalist banner, the *#2019GantiPresiden* movement demonstrated the political potency of Islam when articulated not merely as faith, but as identity, grievance, and aspiration (Arini et al., 2020).

Yet, this mobilization was not without contradiction. On one hand, it represented a vibrant and organized form of political participation by segments of the Muslim community. On the other, it reduced Islam to a binary political identity, weaponized for exclusion and polarization. The moral clarity claimed by the movement often left little room for pluralism, dialogue, or nuance.

In sum, *#2019GantiPresiden* exemplifies how Islam continues to be instrumentalized as populist currency: not only to galvanize support and articulate discontent but to define political legitimacy itself. In the populist logic that shaped this campaign, to be Muslim was to oppose the ruling elite, and to support the regime was to risk being cast outside the moral community of the ummah.

Islam as Symbolic Capital: *Moralization, Identity Politics, and the Politics of Exclusion*

In contemporary Indonesian populism, the instrumentalization of Islam transcends mere expressions of personal piety or collective religious identity. Rather, Islam has been strategically deployed as a form of *symbolic capital*—a powerful resource imbued with cultural legitimacy, moral authority, and emotional resonance. Within the populist logic, this symbolic capital becomes a vehicle to moralize political authority, delineate the boundaries of "the righteous people," and exclude perceived ideological or religious adversaries. Political actors increasingly frame legitimacy not through administrative competence or democratic credentials, but through religious markers such as *ketaatan beragama* (religious devotion), *kedekatan dengan ulama* (alignment with clerics), and *akhlak Islami* (Islamic moral character). Conversely, political opponents are delegitimized through religiously charged labels: *penista agama* (blasphemer), *antek asing* (foreign puppet), *liberal sekuler* (secular liberal), or even *kafir* (infidel). In this way, Islam functions as both a moral benchmark and a boundary-making tool—drawing sharp lines between the "moral majority" and those cast as threats to the ummah. Populist actors do not merely invoke Islam as belief, but as a populist grammar through which power is claimed, enemies are named, and political struggles are sacralized. The result is a highly charged political arena where religious language becomes a shorthand for loyalty, and dissent is easily construed as betrayal—not just of the nation, but of God.

The 2016–2017 campaign to imprison Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok) did not merely mobilize legal arguments or democratic dissent; it crafted a potent religious populist narrative that framed political participation as a test of faith. One of the most viral slogans—*"Pemimpin Muslim*

Wajib Didukung. Pemimpin Kafir Haram Dipilih" ("A Muslim leader must be supported. A non-Muslim leader is forbidden to be elected")—was far more than a political catchphrase. It operated as a performative speech act, transforming electoral choice into a theological imperative. The slogan, echoed in banners, T-shirts, and mosque sermons, created a binary moral universe in which support for Ahok, a Christian of Chinese descent, was not merely a political misjudgment but a religious sin. The language of *wajib* (obligatory) and *haram* (forbidden) collapsed the boundaries between political preference and Islamic jurisprudence, reframing the democratic process through the lens of *fiqh*-based obligation and moral duty.

This moralization was reinforced by fiery declarations from figures like Ustaz Rizieq Shihab, who equated silence in the face of alleged blasphemy with the absence of genuine faith—*"Jika umat Islam tidak marah atas penistaan Al-Qur'an, maka darah keislaman kita patut dipertanyakan!"* Such rhetoric effectively sacralized anger, turning emotional reaction into religious virtue. In this schema, to be indifferent or forgiving was to betray the ummah; to express outrage was to authenticate one's Islamic identity. What we see here is the deep fusion of affect and theology—religious emotions like fear, shame, and anger were not incidental, but central to the construction of a moralized political identity.

More significantly, this form of discourse collapsed political disagreement into a theological deviation. By rendering Ahok's candidacy as religiously illegitimate, populist preachers and activists closed down the space for civic deliberation and pluralist debate. The political "other" was no longer just a rival in governance, but a figure of spiritual contamination—an existential threat to the imagined moral community of the ummah. In this context, Islam was deployed not only as a language of resistance, but as a gatekeeping mechanism, defining the boundaries of legitimate political belonging. This strategy exemplifies how Islamic populism turns religious discourse into a technology of exclusion, delegitimizing difference while consolidating moral-political authority under the banner of divine mandate.

This strategic fusion of faith, emotion, and political allegiance laid the groundwork for a broader phenomenon: the performance of religious identity as a form of political belonging. Building on the moralized binaries established during the Ahok controversy, populist movements in Indonesia began to construct a powerful narrative of who truly constitutes *"the people"*—redefining them in explicitly religious terms. Here, Islam was not only a belief system but a visible, audible, and embodied identity that had to be demonstrated in public space.

This leads us to the second core feature of Islamic populism in Indonesia: Performative Identity Politics and the Making of "the Ummah." Drawing on Benedict Anderson's notion of the *imagined community*, Islamic populism reimagined the Indonesian nation through the lens of *ummah*-based solidarity. The December 2nd, 2016 (212) rally stands as a dramatic instantiation of this vision. With over 7 million participants (Tempo, Dec 3, 2016), the gathering at Monas was not merely a protest—it was a ritual of national redefinition. People wore identical white robes, waved tauhid flags, and raised banners proclaiming *"NKRI Bersyariah"* ("The Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia Under Sharia"), transforming a political grievance into a sacred act of national purification.

These public spectacles operated as more than just political demonstrations—they were *ritualized performances* of religious citizenship. Every chant of *"Allahu Akbar!"*, every tauhid flag raised, and every shared prayer at the rally helped cement a visual and emotional boundary between *the ummah* and its perceived enemies: liberals, non-Muslims, secularists, or so-called *penista agama*. In sermons and digital content circulated during this time, Islamic terms like *munafik, khawarij,* and *kafir dzimmi* were redeployed not in classical theological debates, but to delegitimize fellow citizens who disagreed politically. Thus, belonging to the nation became synonymous with belonging to the ummah—and to dissent from the dominant religious-political narrative was to fall outside the

boundaries of both faith and national loyalty.

In this populist frame, religiosity was no longer private or spiritual—it was performative, political, and obligatory. Islamic symbols, language, and rituals became tools of boundary-making that marked who was in and who was out of the imagined nation. The political arena thus turned into a stage for moral exhibitionism, where visibility of Islamic devotion became proof of national loyalty, and absence of such performance implied betrayal.

CONCLUTION

This study has explored how Islam has been transformed into a form of populist currency in contemporary Indonesian politics. Through a critical discourse analysis of political events and public narratives, particularly surrounding the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election and the 2019 presidential campaign, the research demonstrates that Islam is no longer mobilized merely as a theological or moral compass. Rather, it functions as a strategic symbolic resource—one that political actors use to assert legitimacy, draw moral boundaries, and emotionally mobilize the masses.

The findings indicate three interrelated dynamics: 1). Moralization of politics: Political authority is judged through religious piety and alignment with Islamic clerical voices; 2). Performative construction of "the ummah": Islam is used to shape a collective identity that defines "the people" not only in cultural or ethnic terms, but through a moral-religious lens; and 3). Exclusionary populism: The discourse creates sharp boundaries between the "righteous Muslim majority" and various constructed enemies—non-Muslims, liberals, minorities, and political incumbents.

These processes have profound implications. They erode the boundaries between religious devotion and political manipulation, blur distinctions between faith and ideology, and threaten the foundations of Indonesia's pluralist democracy. The use of Islam as populist currency reveals a deeper trend of moral absolutism, where political competition becomes a zero-sum struggle over religious authenticity.

While populism is not inherently antithetical to democracy, its religious variant, as shown in this case, often undermines democratic values by moralizing power, delegitimizing dissent, and narrowing civic space. Moving forward, it is crucial to promote discourses of inclusive Islam, strengthen civic education, and protect religious symbols from becoming instruments of political division.

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