

CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF ISLAMIC POPULISM

Insights from Indonesian Perspectives

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Abstract: This study aims to provide an alternative insight into understanding Islamic populism. Previously, there has been a long debate about how to frame Islamic populism in Indonesia. The first approach tends to believe that Islamic populism is a product of economic inequality, while the second approach underlies the increasing use of religious identity to mobilize people. Considering both sides, this paper used critical review analysis to find out the gap amidst the existing literature. The result shows that, Islamic populism within the Indonesian context seems to be an emotional movement among especially urban Muslim middle class in that attempts to bring religion into line with dogmatic political preferences. They frustrated with existing Islamic political parties which they considered abandoning true Islamic agenda such as implementation of Islamic law and Islamic leadership so that they resorted to populism. This attitude has grown up recently, especially to 212 movement, “Aksi Bela Ulama” and “Aksi Bela Islam” to keep Islam as the majority.

Keywords: Islamic populism, Islam politics, Indonesian perspective.

Introduction

The emergence of various kinds of mass actions on behalf of Indonesian Muslims in the name of “Aksi Bela Ulama” or “Action of Defending Ulama”, “Aksi Bela Islam” or “Action of Defending Islam”, and what is currently continuing is “212 Alumni Brotherhood” shows that the nuances of Islamization are getting thicker in urban public spaces.¹ This Islamization is not limited to expressions of piety

¹ Muhamad Taufik Kustiawan, et al., “Islamic Leadership Contestation: Exploring The Practices Of Conservative Islamic Movements In Indonesia,” *Jurnal Ummah Islam Futura* 23, 2 (2023)

and religiosity, but also to the mainstreaming of Islamic interests as the voice of the majority in society.² This double intention of Islamization then leads to more obligations for a Muslim where apart from carrying out sunnah and obligatory worship in private, it also includes the obligation to defend and defend Islam in public. The existence of this defensive expression of Muslims became the initial embryo of the emergence of Islamic populism in Indonesia.

The most important reasons for the involvement of the Muslim middle class in various Islamic populism movements are 1) there is no Islamic-based political party that has won elections in Indonesia. This first condition causes disillusionment among some segments of Indonesian Muslims, so they choose the populist movement 2) the populist movement is considered capable of voicing the “true aspirations” of Indonesian Muslims when other Islamic groups have received accommodation from the government³. In this context, the Indonesian Muslim middle class group is actually more attached to the second reason than the first. More importantly, this populist movement does not always require its followers to become cadres or have a deep understanding of religion like *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools) alumni, although they eventually made efforts to improve their basic Islamic knowledge like recitation of the Quran which is indicated by the *Yukngaji* community.⁴ However, the populist movement itself are committed to the spirit of *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar* (enjoining right, forbidding wrong). Another thing that is no less important is that this Islamic populism movement provides a broad space for religious expression for the Muslim middle-class group to be able to identify

² Greg Fealy, “The Politics of Religious Intolerance in Indonesia: Mainstream-Islam Trumps Extremism?”, in *Religion, Law and Intolerance in Indonesia.*, ed. T Lindsey and H Pausacker (London: Routledge, 2016); Ihsan Yilmaz and Greg Barton, “Political Mobilisation of Religious, Chauvinist, and Technocratic Populists in Indonesia and Their Activities in Cyberspace,” *Religions* 12, 10 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12100822>.

³ Marcus Mietzner and Burhanuddin Muhtadi, “Explaining the 2016 Islamist Mobilisation in Indonesia: Religious Intolerance, Militant Groups and the Politics of Accommodation,” *Asian Studies Review* 42, 3 (2018): 479–97, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2018.1473335>.

⁴ M. Abzar Duraesa, Muzayyin Ahyar, “Islamic Popul[ar]ism: Religious Popularism and Activism in the *Yukngaji* Community,” *QIJS* 9, 2 (2021)

themselves as true Muslims⁵. The existence of a symbol of mutualism between the movement and the actors who become the Muslim middle-class group is the main driver of the populism movement in Indonesia. Nevertheless, some trace key actors behind the emergence of this Islamic populism, especially in relation to Aksi Bela Islam and Aksi Bela Ulama. Aidulsyah and Mizuno point out the crucial role of Muslim intellectuals of INSISTS and MIUMI,⁶ whereas Syahputra highlights the MUP's role in triggering the action.⁷ Still, for the great mass, it is the Muslim middle-class group that flocked the streets surrounding national monument.

The consensus of relevant studies shows that the Muslim middle-class group is the main driver of the Islamic populism movement both globally and nationally. As for the global level itself, important political events such as the Arab Spring (2010-2012) and the Arab Spring 2.0 (2018-2021) are important milestones regarding the activism of the Muslim middle class in supporting Islamic populism in the Middle East region. Islamic populism that occurs in the name of economic and political injustice triggers public upheaval against the authoritarian regime. A classic study conducted by Saad Ibrahim in 1998 shows that the emergence of the embryo of Islamic populism was basically born from the idea of strengthening civil society which was influenced by the contestation between secularism and Islamism. This makes the orientation of Islamic populism in Arab countries often change between supporting democracy/authoritarianism and supporting the existence of an Islamic state⁸. In other words, Arabian Islamic populism is unstable and stagnant because it continues to seek the ideal form of a desired system and state. Another reason is that the Muslim middle class is also fragmented based on the ideological lines they stand for, namely secularism, Islamism, or maybe royalism. These three

⁵ Wasisto Raharjo Jati, 'Dari Umat Menuju Ummah: Melacak Akar Populisme Kelas Menengah Muslim Indonesia,' *Maarif: Jurnal Arus Pemikiran Islam Dan Sosial* 12, 1 (2017): pp. 22–36; Wasisto Jati, *Politik Kelas Menengah Muslim Indonesia* (Jakarta: LP3ES, 2017).

⁶ Fachri Aidulsyah, Yuji Mizuno, 'The Entanglement Between Anti-Liberalism And Conservatism: The INSISTS and MIUMI Effect within the "212 Movement" in Indonesia,' *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 14, 1 (2020)

⁷ Iswandi Syahputra, "Social Media Activities and the 212 Movement: The Indonesian Ulema Council's Perspective," *Al-Jami'ab Journal of Islamic Studies* 58, 2 (2020)

⁸ Vedi R. Hadiz, *Islamic Populism in Indonesia and the Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316402382>.

expressions show that Islamic populism often becomes the umbrella movement of the three ideologies to bring about social change.

Concerning on the experience of Islamic populism in the Arabian Peninsula, the position of the Muslim middle class is closely related to the prevailing ideology. This is what makes the pattern of Islamic populism there not only in street demonstrations, but also in the actions of pressure groups. Compared comparatively with the Muslim middle class in Indonesia, of course there are various kinds of differences that need to be underlined.

The first important point to note is that the term “Islamic populism” is a relatively new concept in the study of Indonesian social and political movements. This term has just been popularized by the Indonesian Muslim middle class and the populism movement is not yet fully integrated. Moreover, from an ideological perspective, the Indonesian Muslim middle class occupies a somewhat ambiguous position, neither fully secular nor fully Islamic. This condition places Islamic populism itself not as an ideological movement, but rather as an interest group movement.

These simple brief reviews will be further elaborated in the following discussion. The growing typology of Islamic populism is particularly relevant to this topic. This type of division is important as a basis for thinking about trends and the ideal model of populism for Islamic populism in Indonesia.

This research used the qualitative method, especially critical review analysis to understand the meaning behind the literature. It enables us to show “the gap” among the existing relevant literatures that might still be understudied. The first thing was to collect all the relevant literature and then filtered into several relevant information. The second step was to synthesize all the findings and then compile them into several parts.

Various Type of Populism

The discussion of Islamic populism in Indonesian studies in general follows two important factors, namely 1) disappointment with democracy as a system that benefits the elite more than the public and 2) the strengthening of identity politics as an ideal solution to inequality and discrimination due to an unjust system. From these two things, populism that has developed then tries to present a real and clear voice from the grassroots which is so far has not been very

resonant in the public sphere. This has two main sources: 1) the public aspiration or 2) inspiration from a charismatic/martyr who encourages a massive and significant mass movement⁹. The public in this context is, surely, a rational and pragmatic middle-class group that sees a viral movement as a trigger for social and political change.

An important point when it comes to reading Islamic populism, especially populism in general, is to see the three important points of populism itself. Mudde and Kaltwasser provide these three important elements namely 1) public, 2) elite and also 3) also the common will. Especially the third factor, common will does not always intersect with ideology because populism is still 'thin' to be able to commit clearly to a particular ideology. Moreover, populism itself is often juxtaposed with larger and broader goals and political agendas. Therefore, it could be more than one ideology that drives the populism movement. This condition makes populism more inclined to be associated as an emancipatory power politically.

The existence of an emancipation mission that carried out in the populism movement putting elite and public relations the main focus. Hadiz further underlined the three important factors why the disharmonious relations between the public and the elites actually triggered the populism movement. These factors are 1) anti-establishment, 2) anti-authoritarianism, and 3) favoritism of indigenous identity¹⁰. The meaning of anti-establishment in populism indicates that there is an unequal public representation by the ruling elites which triggers public resistance ranging from the level of criticism to 'against' the regime. In other words, the principle of give government back to the people is essential in seeing this anti-establishment. The most important thing to note from this anti-establishment spirit is that populism actually deepens polarization in society because not all elements of the public are willing to join the populism movement. The meaning of anti-authoritarianism in populism is the public's desire to reject the tendency of power which is increasingly leading to

⁹ Paul D. Kenny, *Populism in Southeast Asia*, Elements in Politics and Society in Southeast Asia (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Paul Kenny, *Populism and Patronage: Why Populists Win Elections in India, Asia, and Beyond* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

¹⁰ Vedi R. Hadiz, "A New Islamic Populism and the Contradictions of Development," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 44, 1 (2014): pp. 125–43, <https://doi.org/10.1080/004723-36.2013.832790>.

authoritarian practices. This is basically a common phenomenon in many countries where democratic regimes resulting from elections may shift towards authoritarian regimes where expressions of opinion and gatherings are limited in the name of national stability and resilience. This condition encourages a populist movement from the public who want political openness. Meanwhile, the meaning of indigenous identity favoritism emphasizes the context of pure people as sovereign actors in democracy. It also means pure people that symbolically and literally has a strong message as the guardians of democracy. However, another message that can be captured from this favoritism of indigenous identity is that it could mean that pure people actually represent people who claim to be native people so that populism is no longer in the name of aspirations on behalf of the people but may even be indigenous. Indigenous meaning in this context is the majority group in terms of identity who actually become a minority in their own land, thus triggering a populist movement.

In line with the discussion of the initial theorization of populism, the formation of Islamic populism indirectly follows the same theoretical and practical scenario. The various scenarios are 1) opposing democracy as a form of anti-establishment attitude by trying to promote the caliphate as an ideal system. 2) opposing the existence of authoritarianism, in this context the political elites are impartial and accommodate the interests of Muslims, and 3) seek to awaken "umma" sentiments as a form of expression of pure people voiced by the Islamist group. By looking at these three aspects, there are two fundamental things that need to be underlined, namely the khilafah and the ummah. However, from these two basic things, it seems that the ummah narrative is the most important factor considering also the wave of Islamization that is and will strengthen in Indonesian politics. (All tables and figures should be cited in the main text as Table 1, Figure 1, etc.). Table 1 summarizes the formatting requirement.

Recent studies on Indonesian politics have illustrated the strengthening of ummah sentiment in Islamic populism. Various experts see the emergence of Islamic populism from various perspectives, for example Marcus Meitzner and Richard Robison and Vedi Hadiz who tend to see populism as part of the current dynamics of political polarization. More specifically, Mietzner sees the emergence of Islamic populism as one of two other variants of populism, namely technocratic populism and chauvinistic populism.

Furthermore, the last two types of populism tend to be closer to nationalism and secularism. In line with previous findings, Hadiz and Robison also see Islamic populism as a form of opposition to secular nationalistic populism. Mietzner himself theorizes the power of figures who are the key drivers of the populism movement. In other words, the charisma factor of populist leaders is an important factor in the emergence of Islamic populism. Whereas Hadiz and Robinson are more inclined to see the euphoric events of political campaigns developing, triggering an escalation in the use of identity politics. That is, hardened polarization is an interesting keyword in dissecting the rise of contemporary populism.

Considering the previous theoretical debates, the emergence of Islamic populism in Indonesia is caused by a representation crisis experienced by Muslims, so that they are more inclined to side with the populism movement because Islamic-based political parties have never won post-reform elections. Meanwhile, another factor that is also important is the identity crisis experienced by Muslims, where those who are the majority appear as a minority in economic and political expression. It is these two conditions that make the sentiment of Islamic populism often carry the spirit of 'Muslim leaders' as well as 'Muslims versus non-Muslims'. These two phrases show that there is a kind of chauvinistic expression of Muslims towards religion, so that it becomes very vulnerable to being politicized. These various religious expressions often agitate the position of the Muslim middle class in this context. What's more, they then also take part in the narrative euphoria, which tells us that the current condition of Islam in Indonesia is lagging the others.

The position of the Muslim middle class towards various variants of populism is certainly more in favor of Islamic populism. The existence of a strong relationship between the Muslim middle class and the populism movement is also related to various factors, namely 1) more expression of personal piety in the public space through the Islamic populism movement, 2) expressions of jihad that can be metaphorically represented/symbolized through these various actions, and 3) Islamic expression by becoming a true Muslim through involvement in various acts of defending Islam. These three expressions actually show the presence of narcissistic tendencies in religion. In the current era of social media, the idea of populism connected with this narcissistic need also appears in the public sphere.

These three things also later developed to be the key in seeing the need for existence and self-identification as a true Muslim behind the strong involvement of the Muslim middle class.

The Relationship between Populism and Muslim Middle-Class

The necessity to exist and gain recognition as a true Muslim through membership in Islamic populist groups is not a novel concept. At least this can already be illustrated through a series of various previous actions, for example those carried out by the Islamic Trade Union, Muhammadiyah, and Masyumi. Previously, these various Islamic organizations were closely related to Islamic populism efforts, even though they were at different levels. However, when evaluating the trends and patterns of Islamic populism in Indonesia, it's crucial to highlight the persistent feeling of inferiority among the majority, which motivates the Muslim middle class to mobilize and take to the streets.

The sense of inferiority experienced by Muslims, especially the Muslim middle class, is also related to inequality in social and economic access. This problem arises because of the systems and social structures that are not the same between Muslims and the existing society. More specifically, the legacy of the colonial system which placed the minority hierarchically above the majority placed Muslims as the majority in the lowest position. The logical consequence is discrimination and socio-economic inequality which form the legacy of the narrative of Islamic populism to date. The early embryo of Islamic populism that resulted from this sense of inferiority reproduced a narrative of injustice which was then responded to by strengthening the community internally. This condition distinguishes the narrative of Islamic populism in Indonesia from the narratives of other groups. Besides the reasons for the narrative of injustice, another thing that needs to be underlined is the internal rivalry experienced by these Islamic organizations which is mainly due to theological differences. This condition causes an unified narrative of Islamic populism among Indonesian Muslims.

The inferiority resulting from the narrative of injustice has implications for the strengthening of symbols and sentiments as a people. The early generation of the Muslim middle class that formed the Islamic populism movement came from among indigenous traders who were unable to compete with traders from immigrants / non-indigenous groups. The existence of social jealousy factors also affects

the competition between these two groups where immigrants / non-natives are more advanced in their business than natives. These conditions eventually led to an escalation in the use of political identities by these traders. The use of identities, for example native-immigrant as well as Muslim-non-Muslim, has been formed since the time of the national movement which has continued until now.

The middle-class group that is affiliated with the Islamic Union as well as the Muhammadiyah organization is basically a group of small and medium traders who are fighting the one-sided price monopoly carried out by non-native traders. This condition triggered collective strengthening as a people which then developed into a new organization. The same thing was experienced by the Islamic Trade Union which later changed to the Islamic Union where its members initiated the formation of the organization which was also a form of response to this injustice, especially regarding economic monopoly. Hadiz responds to the expressions of the two Islamic organizations as a form of 'old Islamic populism'.¹¹ Furthermore, the term refers to the strengthening of populist sentiment as the people are represented as a safeguard in interaction or competition with the secular system. Thus, the initial goal of Islamic populism as seen from the expression of the Islamic Union and Muhammadiyah is more on defensive behaviour as a ummah while building ideological rivalries with secular groups. This condition has made Islamic populism in Indonesia ideologically charged from the start.

The thing that needs to be emphasized when reading the ideological content of Islamic populism is its contact with secular forces. This condition indirectly justifies the existence of rivalry in political streams, especially among the *santri* and *priyayi*. However, it is also important to note that rivalry also occurs internally among Muslims, especially those represented by modernists and traditionalists. This condition has resulted in Islamic populism in Indonesia that has never simultaneously represented the interests of Muslims as a whole. The existence of internal fragmentation in fostering Islamic populism into a unified ummah at least has been experienced by Masjumi in the liberal democracy period. Masjumi as the biggest political umbrella for Muslims in the 50's-decade experienced stagnation in managing the populism sentiments of the people. This condition culminated when

¹¹ Vedi R. Hadiz and R. Robison. "Competing Populism in Post-Authoritarian Indonesia," *International Political Science Review* 38, 4, pp 488–502.

there was internal friction among the Masyumi, especially in the seven phrases in the Jakarta Charter regarding the obligations of Muslims to carry out their Shari'a.¹² The existence of the desire to revitalize the word ummah in the charter actually shows the existence of a populist desire to create an Islamic state which is advocated by Masyumi¹³. The existence of this one-sided desire on behalf of "ummah" then experienced resistance from other Islamic groups such as Muhammadiyah and NU who saw that Muslim populism did not necessarily become exclusive, but also adaptive.

For Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, Islamic populism that leads to an Islamic state should be avoided because it does not reflect Islam as a universal mercy. As for understanding the sentiments of the ummah, especially the Islamic state for Muhammadiyah itself, ideally it is based on a combination of Western education while adhering to the Qur'an and Hadith.¹⁴ Meanwhile for NU, Islamic populism does not always have to lead to an Islamic state. But more on strengthening the role of traditional scholars and local teachings in the community¹⁵. This condition makes the word ummah seem foreign to the two largest Islamic organizations in Indonesia. This condition also makes Islamic populism that is developing in Indonesia now tend not to lead to organizational membership.

The absence of patrons for domestic Islamic organizations ultimately leads the narrative of Islamic populism not to take root at the grassroots. Although NU and Muhammadiyah have been existing for the mainstream Muslim organisation in Indonesia, the current Indonesian Muslim-middle class tend to stick with the global Islam trends, especially middle eastern¹⁶. It follows the dynamics of Islam at the transnational level, especially the Middle East. As for the Muslim middle-class group, who are new Muslims without a genealogy and an

¹² Greg Barton, et.al. "Authoritarianism, Democracy, Islamic Movements and Contestations of Islamic Religious Ideas in Indonesia," *Religions* 12, 8 (2021).

¹³ Remy Madinier, *Islam and Politics in Indonesia: The Masyumi Party Between Democracy and Integralism* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2015).

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 8.

¹⁵ Muhamad Ali, 'Between Faith and Social Relations: The Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama's Fatwas and Ideas on Non-Muslims and Interreligious Relations', *The Muslim World* 110, 4 (2020): 458–80, <https://doi.org/10.1111/muwo.12363>.

¹⁶ Mirjam Lücking, *Indonesians and Their Arab World: Guided Mobility among Labor Migrants and Mecca Pilgrims* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021).

Islamic scientific congregation from any organization, in the end they drift into the current of Islamic populism by carrying the people and jihad without seeing Indonesia contextually as a diverse country. The important point that needs to be conveyed is the reference to jihad and the ummah which is used in cases of Islamic populism always using the case of the Middle East as a reference¹⁷. The Islamic populism movement, for example that occurred in Egypt and Turkey, is the main reference where the Muslim middle class appears as the main actor.

The problem that arises, then, is that there is a kind of contradiction between cases of populism in Indonesia and those in the Middle East.

In short, if the growing Islamic populism in the Middle East leads to a pattern of institutionalization as a political party. Therefore, in Indonesia, the growing Islamic populism relies more on issues which are then framed in the politicization of religion.¹⁸ If that's the case, the mode and character of Islamic populism that has developed in Indonesia so far is still between a defensive and offensive attitude.

In its development, Islamic populism which was originally aimed at being defensive with the label of ummah in order to bind Muslims solidly. Currently, Islamic populism seems to be leading to offensive actions while still using sentimentality and jihad with the aim of mainstreaming Islam in the public sphere. Meanwhile, the rivalry based on the flow of politics that occurred in the 50-60s decade is now more developed in the strengthening of identity politics. Thus, the rivalry between Islam and secularism is still going on, but then the Islamist group claims to be the voice of the majority of Indonesian Muslims, giving the impression of being a big movement. At least these various arguments are illustrated in two recent results on the wave of Islamic populism with the themes "Action of Defending Islam", "Action of Defending Ulama", as well as "Muslim Leaders" that occurred in Indonesia. Apart from that, an interesting thing that is important to note is the transformation of the Muslim middle class as the main supporter of the Islamic populism movement. Previously, the majority

¹⁷ Jeremy Menchik, ed., 'Communal Tolerance', in *Islam and Democracy in Indonesia: Tolerance without Liberalism*, Cambridge Studies in Social Theory, Religion and Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 124–58.

¹⁸ Wasisto Raharjo Jati, "Polarization of Indonesian Society during 2014-2020: Causes and Its Impacts toward Democracy," *Jurnal Ilmu Sosial Dan Ilmu Politik* 26, 2 (2022).

of the Muslim middle-class segment was based on city traders. Now it covers the cross-sector middle class. The important point is when the first generation of middle-class Muslims studied and used Islam as a form of political ideology. In the present era, the Muslim middle-class generation now uses Islam more as part of their lifestyle and religious expression so that it has a populism style¹⁹.

The latest Islamic populism which relies more on religiosity than ideology shows a tendency to become an ummah on a global scale. Unlike the case with Islamic populism which was originally defensive and used the word “ummah” as a form of reinforcement of internal solidarity.²⁰ Currently, the latest populism that is developing uses the word ummah as a form of transnational Muslim solidarity. As described in the previous discussion, this renewed populist orientation is more directed towards what is happening in the Arabian Peninsula. This is also in line with the Arabization of Islam which is prevalent among the Muslim middle class. For this reason, when the spirit of the purification of Islam was dominant in Arabia, it also encouraged the Indonesian Muslim middle class to do the same. In other words, the strengthening of the ummah as a new symbol of Islamic populism will eventually lead to claims of religiosity in the public sphere.

The first thing that needs to be underlined is that in reading the changing patterns and motivations of the Muslim middle class to join the Islamic populism movement, this is a shift from a conservative turn to a religious moral claimant.²¹ As for the conservative turn itself, it is more directed towards actions and movements for the purification of the Islamic religion in accordance with religious beliefs by “fighting” those who are considered to be contrary to Islam. The change to become a religious claimant indicates the expression and mainstreaming of Islam as the majority religion.²² These two conditions formed the basis for the formation of a new Islamic

¹⁹ Carla Jones, "Images of Desire: Creating Virtue and Value in an Indonesian Islamic Lifestyle Magazine," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 6, 3 (2010): pp. 91–117.

²⁰ Wasisto Raharjo Jati, "From the Ummah to the Ummah: Tracing the Roots of Indonesian Muslim Middle Class Populism," *Maarif* 12, 1, pp. 22-36.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 22-23.

²² *Ibid.*

populism movement in Indonesia²³. Especially for religious claimants, this latest Islamic populism shows a tendency to revitalize the glorification of Islam as the majority both in terms of population and influence in politics. Because of that, what is encouraged is that the narratives that form populism are always treated as public memory. As for the various narratives that are often used, for example, “blasphemy of religion”, “insult of the clergy”, as well as other intolerant slogans, so these various slogans are then used to trigger the emotional attitude of Muslims to move in the current of Islamic populism.

The circumstances that are more emotional than fulfilling the spiritual aspect ultimately impact the attitude and position of the Indonesian Muslim middle class when they take part in the Islamic populist action. Emotional narratives and hatred tended to drive the various waves of Islamic populism that emerged earlier. These two things can at least be observed by the increasing need for intolerant and anti-difference narratives which are increasingly being seen in the patterns and movements of Islamic populism in Indonesia. These conditions show that Islam must be at the forefront in all aspects, including political affairs. This sets it apart from the preceding wave of Islamic populism, which emphasized the need to introduce the concept of an Islamic state gradually rather than abruptly. At present, the Islamic populism movement operates irregularly and lacks structure. This has caused Indonesian Islamic populism to lose its independence as a formal political force.

From the discussion of various points of view regarding the comparison of well-developed populism in the era of the national movement with phenomena, the things that differentiate are 1) the ideological context, for example an Islamic state is now no longer the main goal for the Islamic populism movement, but rather the mainstreaming of Islam as a public preference/civil religion and 2) populism for the Muslim middle class is not currently a defensive identity in nature, but is now developing as a form of collective action that perverts democracy in the name of Islam. The table below shows the transformation and orientation of Islamic populism and its relationship with the Indonesian Muslim middle class, it can be described as follows.

²³ Jeremy Menchik, "Moderate Muslims and Democratic Breakdown in Indonesia," *Asian Studies Review* 43, 3 (2019): pp. 415–33, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1035782-3.2019.1627286>.

Table 1. Comparative Analysis of Classical Populism and New Populism

No	Indicator	Classical Islamic Populism	Position of the Muslim Middle Class	New Islamic Populism	Position of the Muslim Middle Class
1	Mainstreaming of Islam in the Public Space	Populism is more towards power struggles	Active in voicing the enforcement of sharia and the Islamic state	Populism is more directed at the accommodation of power	Active in supporting Muslim figures as the new political elite
2	Movement Orientation	Realizing Islam as a basic part of religion	Intellectuals are more sensitive to change	Realizing Islam as a basic guide to the norms of life	<i>Hijrah</i> groups became pioneers in the movement
3	Meaning of Jihad and	Jihad is more towards a battle of ideas.	Intellectuals and the bourgeoisie as leading actors	Jihad can be a means of conflict, especially for those with different views	Depends on the issues raised in the public space
4	The Need for Muslim Leaders	The Muslim leader is the main thing	Fully support	Muslim leadership is mandatory	Fully support

Source: data elaborated by my own

In line with the discussion above, the relationship between Islamic populism and the Muslim middle class is now starting to divert itself towards self-existence. This is related to the strengthening of the existence of Islamic mainstreaming in the public sphere.²⁴ Therefore, the Islamic populism movement, spearheaded by the Muslim middle-class group, primarily targeted pressure groups rather than interest groups. The increasing participation of the Muslim middle class, especially urban Muslims, in the populism movement indicates a desire for more than just public expressions of religiosity. Moreover, the use of narratives and symbols of Islam in public spaces have been rife in recent times by several urban Muslim groups. This is part of an effort to affirm the existence of populism. This also means that populism can be massively mobilized at any time if there are issues and problems

²⁴ Wasisto Jati et al., "From Intellectual to Advocacy Movement: Islamic Moderation, the Conservatives and the Shift of Interfaith Dialogue Campaign in Indonesia," *Ulumuna* 26, 2 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.20414/ujis.v26i2.572>.

that intersect with identity.²⁵ The maintenance of the memory and narrative of Islamic populism in the minds of the Muslim middle class shows that there is a strong desire that Islam as the dominant one is no longer a divine religion, but also a religion in terms of norms and ethics.

The vulnerability of the politicization of religion to the Islamic populism movement shows that the dimension of social change does not touch on a revolution. But more on how these Islamic political forces can get accommodation in the power system with secular political forces.²⁶ This orientation towards accommodation has the aim that Islam can become the main preference in the map of public policy making and its implementation in the public sphere.²⁷ By taking advantage of the large Muslim middle class, especially those centered in big cities, of course the spirit of populism can be moved quickly and easily. This condition could possibly threaten the existence and course of democracy through the holding of general elections every five years. With the increasing intensity of members of the Muslim middle class absorbing information that is disinformation with identity seasoning, it is possible that the election arena could be distorted by the Islamic populism movement.

Even though there are tendencies and indications that Islamic populism will continue to develop in Indonesia. The important thing that needs to be underlined is the foundation of Islamic populism which is not yet as strong as in the cases of Turkey and Egypt.²⁸ Moreover, its relationship with the militancy of the Muslim middle class in participating in the Islamic populism movement. The various things behind the Islamic populism movement have not become populism as strong as in the two countries. The first thing that

²⁵ Gustav Brown, "Civic Islam: Muhammadiyah, NU and the Organisational Logic of Consensus-Making in Indonesia," *Asian Studies Review* 43, 3 (2019): pp. 397–414, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2019.1626802>.

²⁶ Edward Aspinall and Marcus Mietzner, "Southeast Asia's Troubling Elections: Nondemocratic Pluralism in Indonesia," *Journal of Democracy* 30, 2 (2019): pp. 104–18, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2019.0055>.

²⁷ Rojabi Azharghany, Hotman Siahaan, and Akh. Muzakki, "Alliance of Ummah in Rural Areas: A New Perspective on Islamic Populism in Indonesia," *Religions: Jurnal Studi Agama-Agama Dan Lintas Budaya* 4, 4 (2020).

²⁸ Vedi R. Hadiz, "Imagine All the People? Mobilising Islamic Populism for Right-Wing Politics in Indonesia," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 48, 4 (2018): pp. 566–83, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2018.1433225>.

becomes a factor is the charismatic character. In contrast to the schemes of Islamic populism that developed in Middle Eastern countries which arose because of martyrdom and responses to authoritarianism that sparked strong waves of populism, Islamic populism in Indonesia is more inclined to the politicization of religion which is driven by certain figures or groups.²⁹ This makes the spirit of Islamic populism in Indonesia more emotional and intimidating than what happened in the Middle East. In other words, Islamic populism in the Middle East is more directed at cross-class collective movements, whereas Islamic populism in Indonesia is more inclined towards quasi-collective movements driven by certain personal figures. In other words, the life and death of Islamic populism depend on the character and actions of the figures concerned. For this reason, it is not surprising that the Indonesian Islamic populism movement does not focus on party institutionalism but is more partial in that it is divided based on the affiliation of figures. This condition prevents the Islamic populism movement from truly fighting for the interests of grassroots communities. However, it is more about elite patronage which takes advantage of the euphoria of the religiosity of the Muslim middle class on behalf of the patronage of certain political elites.

The Projection of Islamic Populism for the Indonesian Middle Class

The quest of the Indonesian Muslim middle class background has raised problems. Unlike middle eastern context whom background of a homogeneous Muslim middle-class group especially the petty bourgeoisie/traders who have come from the lower middle class, the Indonesian counterpart has various socio-economic background. the socio-economic background of the Indonesian Muslim middle class itself is quite diverse. They do not come from the petty bourgeoisie like those in Egypt or Turkey so they see Islam as an ideology and a religion of liberation. Broadly speaking, the Indonesian Muslim middle class group can be categorized as *nouveau riche* (whose attachment to Islam is not yet firmly rooted).³⁰ They only learn to understand Islam

²⁹ Marcus Mietzner, 'Authoritarian Innovations in Indonesia: Electoral Narrowing, Identity Politics and Executive Illiberalism', *Democratization* (2019), pp. 1–16, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2019.1704266>.

³⁰ Ariane Utomo et al., "Who Wears the Hijab? Predictors of Veiling in Greater Jakarta," *Review of Religious Research* 60, 4 (2018): pp. 477–501; Ward Berenschot, "The

when they have reached stability so that when it comes to describing the narrative of inequality it feels like it has no roots. There is not yet a strong root of Islam in the person which causes the narrative and existence of Islamic populism itself to tend to be partial in its existence. What's more, especially regarding the narrative of inequality and alienation of Islam in Indonesia, it seems more artificial because most participants in Islamic populism movements, for example the Action of Defending Islam, the Action of Defending Ulama, and to Choose Muslim Leaders, are middle class, well-established Muslims, both in terms of education and income.³¹ To put it succinctly, the emergence of the Islamic populism movement among the Indonesian Muslim middle class is primarily driven by acts of narcissism and a search for identity as new Muslims, often through the promotion of Islam in public discourse. This means that Islam itself is not attached as an ideology, but rather as an identity that is needed to strengthen one's self-image as a devout Muslim.

Concerning the various explanations put forward earlier, the comparative discussion of Islamic populism that occurred in the Middle East, especially Egypt and Turkey, with what happened in the case of Islamic populism in Indonesia is briefly presented in the following tabulation. Broadly speaking, table two below summarizes various indicators that explain the comparative success and decline of the populism movement that occurred in the two regions.

Political Economy of Clientelism: A Comparative Study of Indonesia's Patronage Democracy," *Comparative Political Studies* 51, 12 (2018): pp. 1563–93; Wasisto Jati, "Investigating the Political Base of Indonesian Middle Class: A Comparative Study," *Komunitas: International Journal of Indonesian Society and Culture* 9, 2 (2017): pp. 267–82, <https://doi.org/10.15294/komunitas.v9i2.6273>; Utomo et al., 'Who Wears the Hijab? Predictors of Veiling in Greater Jakarta'.

³¹ Edward Aspinall and Marcus Mietzner, "Indonesia's Democratic Paradox: Competitive Elections amidst Rising Illiberalism," *Bulletin of Indonesian Economic Studies* 55, 3 (2019): pp. 295–317; Greg Fealy and Ronit Ricci, "Diversity and Its Discontents: An Overview of Minority–Majority Relations in Indonesia," *Contentious Belonging: The Place of Minorities in Indonesia*, ed. Greg Fealy and Ronit Ricci (ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2019), pp. 1–16; Aspinall and Mietzner, "Indonesia's Democratic Paradox: Competitive Elections amidst Rising Illiberalism.

Table 2: Comparative Analysis of Middle Eastern Populism and Indonesia Populism

No	Populism Movement Indicator	Middle Eastern Islamic Populism	Indonesian Islamic Populism
1	Muslim Middle-Class Background	The background comes from Lower Middle	Upper Middle and Lower Middle
2	Middle Class Perspective on Islam	Islam is a Liberation Ideology	Islam is Existence Identity
3	The Influence of Figures in the Populism Movement	Martyrs / Jihadists	Scholars / Hijra Celebrities
4	Orientation of the Islamic Populism Movement	Leading to System and Power Change	Expecting the Accommodation of Power
5	Political Preferences in the Populism Movement	Brotherhood	Brotherhood

Source: data elaborated by my own

Referring to the discussion in the table, there is a significant difference between the Islamic populism that is developing in the Middle East and what is happening in Indonesia. In general, Indonesian Islamic populism seeks to imitate what happened in the Middle East, for example, the issues of Palestine, Jihad, as well as economic inequality caused by Western dominance. Upon the introduction of these issues in Indonesia, a significant portion of the Muslim middle class in the country enthusiastically embraced and valued the fight for these diverse issues. However, there are not a few middle-class groups who take up other issues which are the factors being fought for in the populism movement. In other words, the Islamic populism that is developing in Indonesia does not really focus on one big rooted issue. The focus is primarily on emotional expression, with the aim of criminalizing both the clergy and religion itself. There is a chauvinistic placement of religion that is more visible in the Islamic populism movement that is developing in Indonesia than collective issues that depart from the grassroots.³²

³² Zainuddin Syarif and Abd Hannan, "Islamic Populism Politics and Its Threat to Indonesian Democracy," *Al-Tahrir: Jurnal Pemikiran Islam* 20, 2 (2020).

Comparative studies of Islamic populism in the Middle East and Indonesia reveal its impact on the position and existence of the Muslim middle class. The labelling of this middle-class Muslim group as part of the change group basically shows the existence of the essence of the desired social change. The basic meaning of populism itself actually leads to fundamental changes in the system. According to this objective, there is a significant difference between the Muslim middle class in Indonesia and those in the Middle East. The primary and crucial point to emphasize is the distinct nature of the middle class in the two regions. Islamic populism has become ingrained in the middle class because it is more on ideological factors. Meanwhile, the middle class in Indonesia sees Islam itself as a part of identity that seeks recognition and existence. This perspective on Islam is what makes the dimensions of Islamic populism in Indonesia similar but not the same as those in the Middle East.

Conclusion

The emotions have shaped the Islamic populism to run in an Indonesian context. The influence of charismatic ulama as patron, the unequal accessibility of resources, and the long absence of electoral victory for the Islamic parties have made up mind to turn to the populism movement. The recent movements such as Islam defending action, ulama defending action, and 212 movement have shown the Islamic populism remains resilient. Compared with other populist movements that aspired to be parties, the populism movement seems to only respond to issues rather than being structured. This finding surely contributes to the large extent of populism studies globally. []

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