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Islamic Populism and Voting Trends in Indonesia

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Muslims attend Friday prayers with social distancing measures in place due to the Covid-19 pandemic at the Golden Dome mosque in Depok, West Java, on 17 September 2021. Photo: Adek Berry, AFP.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- In recent years, the global populist surge driven by religio-political sentiments has taken root in various developing democracies exploiting pre-existing religio-political cleavages within society.
- India with its ruling Hindu-centric nationalist right-wing party BJP under Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Turkey under the “new Islamic sultan” Recep Tayyip Erdogan are two of the most prominent examples of illiberal populist rulers employing religious rhetoric in rallying their supporters and in the process severely undermining the pluralist-secularist nature of the state.
- Indonesia is another such case. Although the “left–right” ideological spectrum is inadequate in deciphering the landscape of Indonesia’s electoral system, a comparable “left–right” religio-political cleavage can nevertheless be identified within the “pluralist –Islamist” voting bloc spectrum found in this country.
- This paper uses quantitative survey analysis to empirically determine the percentage of Indonesian voters classified as Islamic populists. Pro-Islamic populists comprised 16.3%, while 33.9% identified with the anti-Islamic populists.
- A strong correlation is found between former presidential candidate and current Defence Minister Prabowo Subianto’s supporters and their propensity for displaying a high level of pro-Islamic populist attitudes. Vice versa, President Jokowi’s supporters display a consistent tendency of being anti-Islamic populists.

INTRODUCTION

There is growing consensus that populism is a thin ideology that can travel and attach itself across a wide ideological spectrum, from socialism to ethno-nationalism to religio-political convictions such as Islamism).¹ Consequently, the literature on Islamic populism has also grown rapidly in the last decade along with the increase in populism globally, both in established and new democracies, including Muslim-majority countries such as Indonesia.

In this article, we take a look at the emerging concept of Islamic populism. Building on previous works by other scholars, we have developed a series of measurements for this variant of populism. We applied these measurements in a representative national survey in February 2020² to determine the proportion of the electorate which would fall within the Islamic populist camp in Indonesia. We explored the correlations between those with Islamic populist tendencies and support for Joko Widodo (Jokowi) and alternatively for Prabowo Subianto in the 2019 presidential election, and between Indonesian voters with Islamic populist tendencies and their support of various political parties in the 2019 legislative election.

RELIGIOUS POPULISM IN ASIA

The religio-political strand in global populist surge which gained significant ground within the context of established democracies, such as Hindu-centric populism in India and Islamic populism in Turkey, marked the establishment of a populism cloaked in religious morality rhetoric. Populist actors, including Islamists who propagate Islamic populism, generally separate society into two groups that are homogeneous and antagonistic: “righteous people” versus the “corrupt elites”.³ While it is true that most ideologies are based upon fundamental opposition between the people and the elite, in populism the opposition relies on moral concepts, where the “righteous people” possess higher morality by representing the general will, while the elites are considered as immoral.⁴ Islamic populism in Indonesia adopts a strategy similar to that used by religious populist actors in other countries. In Turkey, the AKP has successfully led a cross-class alliance and exploited the grievances and marginalisation of ‘pious’ Turkish Muslims long oppressed by the secular Kemalist establishment. In Indonesia, similar self-reinforcing narratives of socio-economic injustices arising from the marginalisation of the “righteous people” have drawn on pre-existing religio-racial, regional and class divisions, as well as the existence of minorities (i.e., ethnic Chinese) painted as being in cahoots with, and puppets of the “neo-liberal” Western elites.

The defining characteristic of Islamic populism is not that it is anti-elitist, but also that it is anti-pluralist. For populists, including those of the Islamic strand, pluralism, legitimate opposition and checks and balances inherent in democracy generally hinder the popular will. Anyone who declares opposition to the general will is considered part of the corrupt elites. As Recep Tayyip Erdogan retorted when responding to criticism directed at him after his Islamist party appointed him as the presidential candidate in August 2014: ‘We are the People – who are you?’⁵ In India, the “Hindu First” message is implied in the rhetoric of its ruling BJP party to the exclusion of the Muslim minority within the country, threatening the secular-pluralist foundation of that country enshrined in the constitution.

Islamic populism in Indonesia also shares a similar characteristic with Indian religious populism on the issue of allocation of material resources. It believes that the state should adopt a practice of exclusion-and-inclusion when distributing state resources, both monetary and non-monetary.⁶ In a highly unequal country like Indonesia,⁷ Islamic populists demand that the “natives” receive (more) state resources than, for example, the Chinese minority which is portrayed as having enjoyed privileges for decades, resulting in their supposed control of economic life in Indonesia. According to this line of reasoning, the ethnic Chinese must be excluded from access to resources, while indigenous groups must be prioritised.

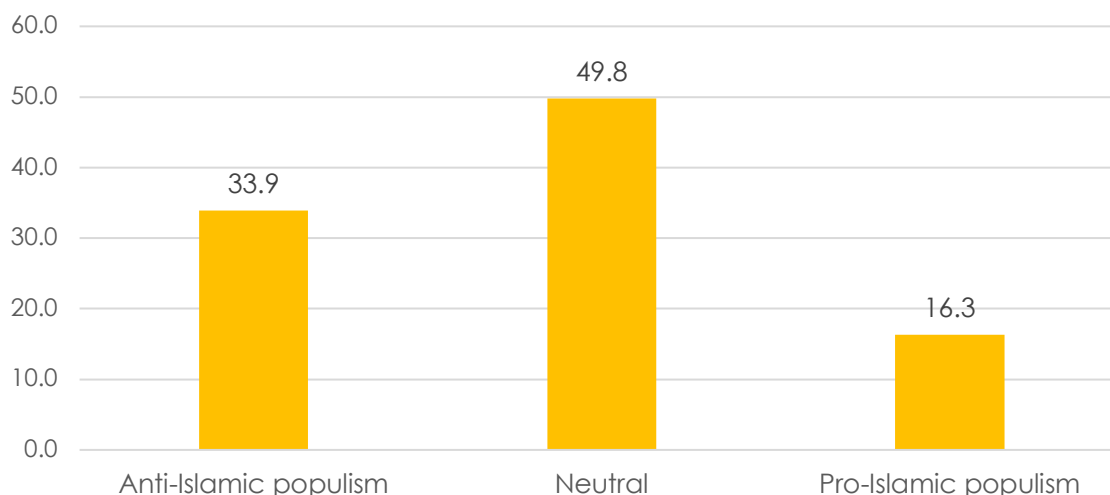
HOW PREVALENT IS ISLAMIC POPULISM?

In this section, we examine the level of support for Islamic populism in Indonesia. Using the theoretical framework offered by Mietzner (2020) who argues that Islamic populism has surged in Indonesia due to several latent ingredients in the socio-political history of the country,⁸ we have sought to gauge the levels of Islamic populism by asking respondents to indicate their level of agreement with the following three statements:

1. Muslims in Indonesia should receive preferential treatment compared to other religious groups.
2. Chinese Indonesians should have fewer rights than Indonesian Muslims.
3. Indonesia must be ruled in accordance with Islamic sharia law.

Each respondent was asked to show his/her agreement on each item by using a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = neutral; 4 = agree; 5 = strongly agree).⁹

Figure 1. The level of Islamic populism in Indonesia (%)



Based on our findings,¹⁰ 16.3% of Indonesians in 2020 can be classified as being pro-Islamic populism, while 33.9% were anti-Islamic populism. Despite its relatively small percentage, what Islamic populists lack in numbers is more than compensated for by their

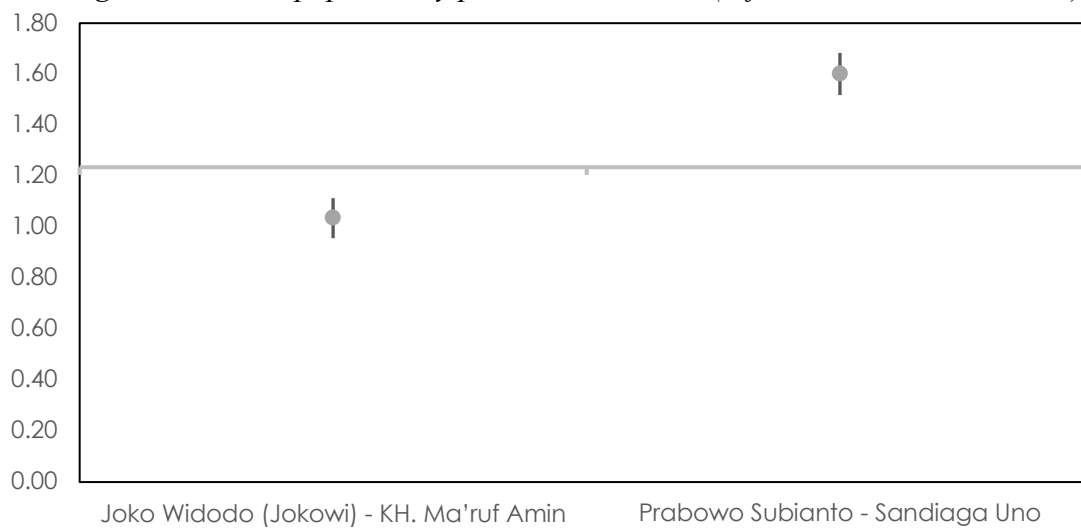
militant and active mobilisation capabilities. This was demonstrated through groups such as the 212 movement, also known as Defend Islam Action, on the eve of the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election in their mass actions against Governor Basuki Purnama (an ethnic Chinese popularly known Ahok), demanding that he be tried for blasphemy against Islam.

ISLAMIC POPULIST SUPPORT AND PRESIDENTIAL CHOICE

In this section, we consider the connection between Islamic populist attitudes and presidential choice in the 2019 presidential election. We compare the mean scores on the Islamic scale to that for the presidential vote. Figure 2 shows both the mean scores and the confidence interval for the mean scores (>95%) for the presidential choice in 2019 on the Islamic populism scale. Where the confidence interval does not cross the reference line, the relationship between Islamic populist attitude and presidential vote is statistically significant, at the 5% level.

We discover that Prabowo supporters display a higher attitudinal tendency on the Islamic populism scale. Jokowi's supporters, on the other hand, display a notably lower tendency for Islamic populist attitude on this scale. The question that then begs to be answered is why do Prabowo supporters tend towards Islamic populism, especially when, personally and ideologically, Prabowo has no Islamist views and no history of being close to the Islamist camp before the 2014 election. Furthermore, Prabowo comes from a secular and pluralist background. His mother and several of his siblings are Christians. What appears relevant is that Prabowo has been both an enabler and a beneficiary of Islamist populism.¹¹ Since 2014, Prabowo did not hesitate in using Islamist issues to form a coalition with Islamist organisations in an attempt to defeat Jokowi. Prabowo supporters propagated massively on social media that Jokowi was a Christian, a communist, and a Chinese stooge. In 2016, Prabowo nominated Anies Baswedan as candidate for governor of Jakarta against the Christian-Chinese governor Ahok, and in doing that, he had full support from all Islamist groups. In 2019, Prabowo again took advantage of the divisive religious issue and garnered the support of Islamist groups, and on a larger scale than in 2014.

Figure 2. Islamic populism by presidential choice (reference line is total mean)



It is our assessment that this bloc of Islamic populists, though seemingly a minority, will remain a very significant constituency in upcoming elections. This is evidenced from Prabowo’s credible performance in the 2019 election in the face of significant challenges. In the 2014 election, Prabowo had stronger support among political parties and arguably greater resources than in the 2019 Presidential Election when he faced an uphill battle fighting the incumbent President Jokowi. In 2019, Prabowo was supported by a smaller coalition comprising mainly of conservative and right-wing Islamist parties such as PKS and PAN and with fewer financial resources. Even with the odds stacked heavily against him, Prabowo managed to secure 44.50% of the votes, less than a 3% drop in his 46.85% vote share in 2014. It should also be noted that due to the alarming rise in identity politics and the political entrepreneurialism of several major Islamic populist actors during the 2016-2019 period, Jokowi was also under heavy political pressure at the time to pick Ma’ruf Amin, a prominent conservative Islamic cleric, as his running mate to burnish his Islamic credentials and to shield him from attacks by right-wing Islamic populist groups. A major caveat to this strategy should also be made that appeasing the minority Islamic populists (which, according to our data comprises only 16.3% of the electorate) by advocating Islamic populist priorities has strong limitations – by itself, this would not secure victory in a majority-pluralist country like Indonesia. It is entirely plausible that a Islamic populist presidential candidate may appear in the 2024 election, who has stronger Islamist credentials than Prabowo, and if such a person is paired with a “centrist” figure, then that combination may secure a ticket to the second round of the presidential run-off in a 3-way or 4-way presidential contest in 2024.

ISLAMIC POPULIST ATTITUDES AND PARTY CHOICE

We also explore the relationship between Islamic populist support and party choice, based on the national survey we conducted in 2020.

Variations in support for Islamic populism are more visible in each party’s constituent base. The constitution of the coalition of parties supporting Jokowi and Prabowo in the 2019

presidential election alone does not explain the level of support they enjoyed from Islamic populists. Interestingly, Golkar, the main party supporting Jokowi, has a mass base that has a mean score of Islamic populism support that is higher than that for PKS and almost on par with that for PAN. Golkar’s level of support from Islamic populists is only slightly below that from Prabowo’s Gerindra voters, who scored the highest mean on the Islamic populism scale. The current Jakarta Governor Anies Baswedan made the interesting observation that there exists a long tradition of migration of old Masyumi (the biggest Islamic party in the 1950s) supporters to Golkar after the dissolution of the Islamic party by Soekarno in 1960.¹² Aside from that, Golkar’s traditional leadership pool has been dominated by HMI (Muslim Students Association) alumni figures since the era of Akbar Tanjung. From KPU (General Election Commission) and survey data, we also found that Golkar’s support for Jokowi in the 2019 election cost them votes in their traditional regional bases in West Java, West Sumatra, Banten and South Kalimantan; Golkar loyalists, especially those sympathising with Islamic populism in those provinces, switched their votes to Gerindra. As illustrated in Figure 4, Gerindra managed to increase their overall vote share in 2019 to 12.57%, up from 11.81% in 2014. With that, it replaced Golkar as the second biggest party after PDI-P. Golkar’s overall vote share in 2019 (12.31%) suffered a significant drop from their 2014 vote share (14.75%).

Figure 3 also shows that voters who scored below the mean on the Islamic populism scale tended to support parties that are more nationalist and anti-Islamist in orientation, i.e., Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono’s Demokrat Party, NasDem, PKB and PDI-P; these voters are thus placed in the anti-Islamic populism camp.

Figure 3. Islamic Populist Attitudes by Party Choice (the reference line marks the total mean)

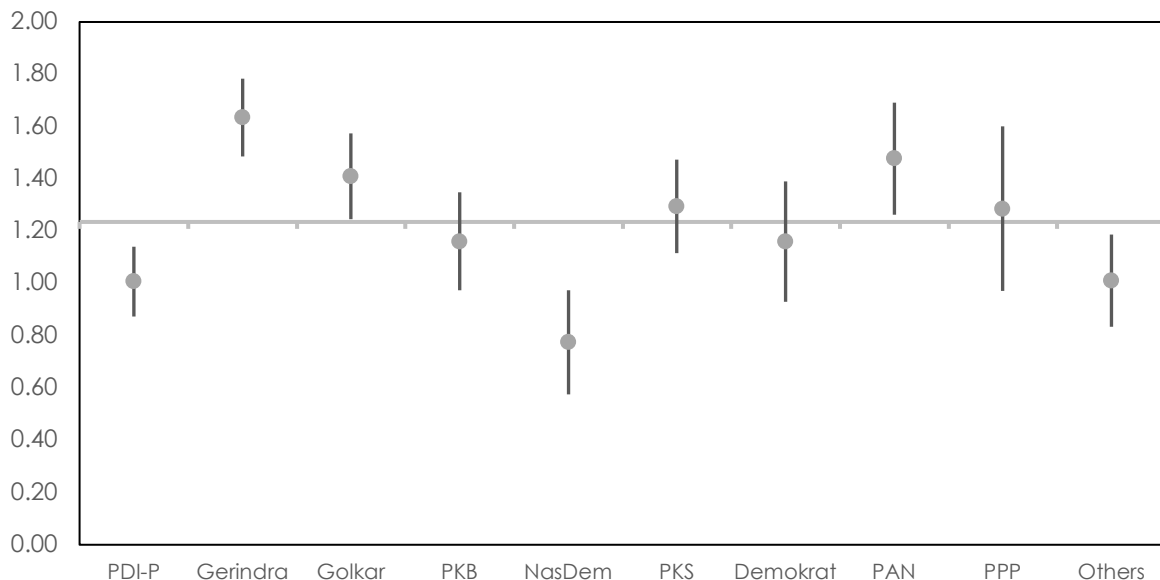


Figure 4. Comparison of “Islamic Populists” Party Vote Share in 2014 VS 2019

	Vote Share	
	2014	2019
Gerindra	11.81%	12.57%
Golkar	14.75%	12.31%
PKS	6.79%	8.21%
PAN	7.59%	6.84%

CONCLUSION

This study has shown the similarities that exist between religio-political populism in Indonesia and that in other Asian democracies such as India and Turkey; the strength of its appeal among Indonesian voters has also been affirmed. We determined the overall level of support for Islamic populism and against it, as well as a relationship between Islamic populism the voting pattern in the 2019 elections. Prabowo supporters tended to hold pro-Islamic populism sentiments compared to Jokowi’s voters based on the established definition of Islamic populism in the survey. Likewise, in general, opposition parties tended to represent voters who had been disappointed with the existing order and these have Islamic populist attitudes.

Based on the latest survey data from several credible pollsters, including from Indikator¹³ in August 2021, there is strong indication that Prabowo’s support level (26.2%) has declined significantly due to the Islamic populist voters shifting their support to Jakarta Governor Anies Baswedan (15.5%).

It remains to be seen in the 2024 election whether Islamic populism attitudes among voters remain as high as in 2019, especially after the imprisonment of Rizieq Shihab, one of the most prominent charismatic Islamic populist actors in recent Indonesian political history. This has coincided with the latest Democracy Index for 2020 Report by Economist Intelligence Unit¹⁴ which showed a further decline for Indonesia to its lowest point of 6,30, putting it in the “flawed democracies” category or at 64th place out of 167 countries.

Ironically, the score on civil liberties for Jokowi’s government is also at its lowest, marked by among other things the disbandment of FPI (Islamic Defenders Front) on December 2020. FPI was the main advocate of Islamic populism in the last 2019 election. The emergence of identity politics since the 2014 election and rising anti-pluralist sentiments especially during the mass Jakarta protest or 212 Action in 2016, led to the crackdown on vocal Islamist groups and actors after the 2019 election. These two factors in combination—the rising of identity politics among Islamist populist groups and the state crackdowns on

Islamist organisations—contribute to the growing illiberal trend that weakens Indonesian democracy.

The debate is now on whether the “disappearance” of a charismatic populist actor will weaken Islamic populism or whether it will deepen the sense of grievance and marginalisation circulating within the Indonesian *ummah*.

¹ Cas Mudde, ‘The Populist Zeitgeist,’ in *Government and Opposition* 39 (4) (2004): 541–563.

² Field observations were carried out simultaneously in all regions on 5-10 February 2020. The population for this survey were Indonesian citizens with the right to vote, who were thus 17 years old and above, or already married when the survey was conducted. Using a questionnaire, the interviews were conducted face-to-face by our interviewers on 1,220 voting-age adults who were selected with multistage random sampling. These were proportionally distributed over the 34 provinces. Based on this sample size, the estimated margin of error is $\pm 2.9\%$ at 95% confidence level, assuming a simple random sampling design.

³ Cas Mudde, ‘Populism: An Ideational Approach,’ in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, Cristóbal Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart, Paulina Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy (eds.), (Oxford University Press, 2017): 4.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Jan-Werner Muller, ‘Parsing populism: Who is and who is not a populist these days?’ in *IPPR*, 13/10/2015: <https://www.ippr.org/juncture/parsing-populism-who-is-and-who-is-not-a-populist-these-days>

⁶ Cas Mudde & Cristóbal Kaltwasser, ‘Exclusionary vs. Inclusionary Populism: Comparing Contemporary Europe and Latin America,’ in *Government and Opposition*, 48(2) (2013): 147–174.

⁷ Burhanuddin Muhtadi, Eve Warburton & Aninda Dewayanti, ‘Perceptions of Inequality in Indonesia: A Matter of Partisan Politics?’ in *Perspective* (ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2019).

⁸ Among others “(a) pre-existing religio-racial, regional or class divisions, the politicisation of socioeconomic inequalities within the framework of those divisions, (c) the availability of minorities as mobilising targets for populist campaigns, and (d) the willingness of established parties to support populists in order to retain political significance.” See, Marcus Mietzner, ‘Rival populisms and the democratic crisis in Indonesia: chauvinists, Islamists and technocrats.’ *Australian Journal of International Affairs* (2020): 1–19.

⁹ The Cronbach’s alpha coefficient for the variables used to measure Islamic populism above is 0.815, meaning that the variables have a high degree of internal consistency.

¹⁰ To establish what the general level of Islamic populism in Indonesia is, we composed an index developed from the responses to the three questions above. A score of between 66.6668-100 (that is, if a respondent answered all questions or almost all questions in the affirmative) leads to the classification as ‘pro-Islamic populism’; a score of between 33.3334-66.6667 denotes ‘neutral’ and a score of 0-33.3333 indicates ‘anti-Islamic populism.’

¹¹ Mietzner, ‘Rival populisms,’ 2020: 7.

¹² Anies Rasyid Baswedan (2004). Political Islam in Indonesia: Present and Future Trajectory. *Asian Survey*, 44(5), 669–690. doi:10.1525/as.2004.44.5.669

¹³ <https://indikator.co.id/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Rilis-Indikator-25-Agustus-2021.pdf>

¹⁴ The Economist Intelligence Unit’s Democracy Index, “Democracy Index 2020: In sickness and in health?” <https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2020/>

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