



# Digitization and Islamic Populism Discourse in Educational Arena in Indonesia

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**Abstract** — Reformation in line with democratization post-1998 in Indonesia provided an increasingly open space as a forum for the dissemination and the contestation of ideological identity resulting in the development of transnational and local Islamic movements in various regions. The contestation and dissemination of ideological identity, particularly Islamic identity, has penetrated into academic culture of education in Indonesia. This article is a study on secondary data and literature concerning Islamic populism discourse as one of dissemination and contestation discourses in digital society in Indonesia. The approach used in conducting research was a descriptive qualitative method by means of analyzing secondary data such as scientific journal, article, and observation on social media. The author concluded that the process of digital infrastructure highly developing recently has been a capital in resonating and building populism politics. It is triggered by democratization in using social media, so that the people can choose which religious guidance or religious authority they believe in (private theology). Therefore, digitization through social media makes Islamic populism work effectively and efficiently.

**Keywords** — Islamic populism, digitization and educational arena

## I. INTRODUCTION

Religious political movement during 2016-2017 reaffirmed the Islamic populism in Indonesia. It was because of large-scale Islam community mobilization they called “people power”. The 411 and 212 movements brought extraordinary flush to Indonesia, as both positions diametrically the government as the ruler and the opposition as the one feeling oppressed, in the name of one identity, Islam community. Resonance is increasingly echoing in all lines of life in Indonesia with the use of social media.

The consequence of political mobilization in 2017 has penetrated into all lines of life. In political field, the mobilization resulted in a group called *Gerakan Nasional Pengawal Fatwa (GNPF) MUI* (a National Movement for Monitoring the *Fatwa* of MUI) mobilized the mass successfully [1]. Diametric position or polarization within society, particularly in social media, at that time was called the feud of “*cebong* versus *kampret*” (tadpole versus shucks). The residue of either conventional or digital political process has an impact on electoral politics

in regional head election of DKI Jakarta and then Indonesia’s presidential election (*Pilpres*) in 2019.

Political events occurring in 2016-2017 are not the beginning of Islamic populism in Indonesia. Reformation that was in line with democratization post-1998 in Indonesia instead became an entrance of ideological identity dissemination and contestation in Indonesia. Reformation opened the door for the trans-national movements to propagate their view in Indonesia, including ideological propaganda. Arifianto’s (2019) study found that post-reform signed the rise of Islamism and the destruction of mainstream Islam authority due to the presence of new Islam authority figures that propagate their views using new methods, from social media to community-based organization and activity (*majelis taklim*)[2], [3].

The entry and development of trans-national Islamic movements in Indonesia is of course inseparable from the context of 21<sup>st</sup> century time, in which the world’s borders are no longer so meaningful, particularly in communicating with each other between communicants in all corners of the world. The internet is one of the media to carry out the activities above. Every social movement disseminated through utilizing technological elements, one of which is social media, can distribute information and mobilization easily in high speed [4]. It will be very relevant to discuss Islamic populism in Indonesia inseparable from digitization process. This article discusses Islamic populism discourse in Indonesia particularly in educational arena closely related to digitization process.

## II. METHOD

The approach used in conducting this research was qualitative one with descriptive qualitative method. This research was carried out by means of analyzing secondary data such as scientific journals, article, and observation on social media. It can be said that this research is a secondary data research and literature study on Islamic populism discourse as one of dissemination and contestation discourses in digital society in Indonesia.

This research started with studying some literatures constituting the previous studies related to populism development, populism trajectory and interrelation between populism, populism trajectory and digital society in Indonesia. The development of new cases can be the key to more factual analysis and conclusion.

### III. RESULT

#### Islamic Populism in Indonesia

Indonesia is the largest Muslim state in Indonesia. Based on Globalreligiustofuture (2018), 209.12 million Indonesian people adhere to Islam religion or about 87% of total population. The number of Indonesian Muslim population is expected to reach 229.62 million people in 2020 [5]. Meanwhile, the state with the third largest number of Muslim population in the world is Pakistan, 167.41 million people. Meanwhile, the number of Muslim populations reaches 1.6 billion people in the world in 2010, or about 23% of world's total populations.

Majorities (87%) of Indonesian populations are Muslims, but the majority quantity does not make "Islam" the state's foundation or ideology. Indonesia's state ideology is Pancasila, with its first principle reading "Belief in the divinity of God, (in Indonesian, *Ketuhanan Yang Maha Esa*). It leads to the appearance of movements that want to make the state's ideology the Islamic state, movement or organization. The movement or the organization wanting the change of state's ideology, and the domination of Islam values in the principles of life is called "Islamic Populism"[6]. Basically, the big ideological fight between nationalism, communism, and Islam has been existing in Indonesia since the beginning of its independence [7]. This fight occurred in in 1955 constituting the first general election and became a kind of democratic experiment.

The populism developing now in Indonesia is different from the populism in general. Indonesia, Egypt and Turkey, according to Hadiz (2019), are the states with some similarities in the term of their Muslim majority population, colonialism experience, and national independence. Viewed from economic-political and sociological-historical approaches, the populism trajectory in Indonesia tends to lead to failure [8], [9]. The analysis emphasized on material factors causes the failure of populism in Indonesia. Hadiz (2014) explains that populism developing in Indonesia is Islamic populism constituting the variant of populism [8]. He thinks that Islamic populism is an asymmetric multiclass alliance identifying itself as the *ummah* vis-a-vis elite as the response to social contradiction in contemporary capitalism development. Islamic populism also carries out mobilization and homogenizes varying "mass" dissatisfactions that fight against certain "elite" differently.

In its new format, Islamic populism has broader and more varying social bases and can fight freely through electoral channel [8], [9]. Because it is emphasized on the material base as the determinant of successful Islamic politics in Indonesia, the bases play a very important part here. Homogenization in Islamic populism occurs not through the people, but through *the ummah*. In Islamic populism, the concept "*ummah*" is used to replace the concept of *the people*. Although, the *ummah* is often conceived in the supranational framework, the Islamic movement appearing through real struggle encourages the development of more national conception such as the 212 and 411 movements.

Religious populism will not be present in the vacuum, but its presence is instead highly influenced by digital

process. Digitization process highly developing recently becomes a capital to build populism politics. In digital process, religious or Islamic populism is present in the religious narration developing in social media. The data of survey conducted by PPIM UIN Jakarta using data from Twitter within decade timeframe 1 (2009-2019) reveals that in the period, 1.9 million tweets are collected, and out of the number of tweets filtered, 458,582 tweets were collected from 100,799 users with 7,367,190 followers. The tweets indicate that religious narration in cyberspace is dominated by conservatism (67.2%), followed by moderate, liberal, and Islamic conceptions [10]. The data is illustrated in the figure 1.

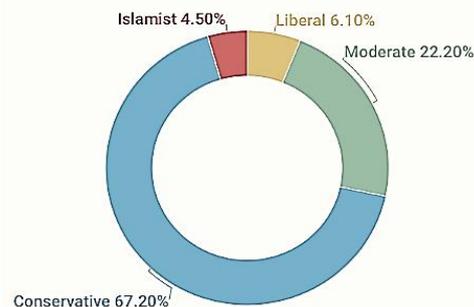


Figure 1. Proportion of Religious Conception in Social Media

The data of previous survey [11] recorded that internet access for religious knowledge or religious education is one of important factors in making people intolerant. Another survey conducted by PPIM UIN Syarif Hidayatullah (2018) reported that 43.88% of 1,859 Senior High School students surveyed supported intolerant acts in general and 6.56% of them are radical. In addition, 500 teachers of religion education and 200 Senior High School students concluded that intolerance pattern amid society has strong base in public schools, particularly in Java [12]. Some factors affecting the appearance of intolerance practice in school: religious factor (poor understanding on religious teachings among adolescents), unstable psychological condition of adolescents, young generation's inadequate access to politics, and economic factors such as poverty and gap.

In addition to tolerance problem, adolescents or students' access to internet for searching religious knowledge also leads to Islamic populism issues. The mass actions with tagline *Aksi Bela Islam 212* (Action to Defend Islam 212) and *Aksi Bela Islam 411* (Action to defend Islam 411) contributed to reproducing Islamic populism, of course, not only in politics but also in Education. MAARIF Institute (2018) reported that, with an excuse of defending the religion, the students in some schools in Cianjur and Sukabumi Regencies under their teachers' coordination went to Jakarta to join the *Aksi Bela Islam 212* (Action to Defend Islam 212). Similarly, in Yogyakarta and Padang cities, some students uploaded their actions in both 212 and 411 in social media such as Instagram and twitter [13].

In Indonesia, Islamic populism is an urban phenomenon. The rise of middle-class vocal urban Muslim in Indonesia is inseparable from the position of urban-modernist Muslims that were previously marginalized during New Order reign, encouraging these groups to build

and to maintain the rise of new Islamic populism. Generally, contemporary urban Muslims look continuously for the world defined religiously and providing moral order and spiritual protection to human beings. In this materialistic world, according to Peter Berger, religion or religious worldview is a 'sacred canopy' [14].

To urban Muslims, Islam represents various 'sacred canopies' fostering bond and shared piety and imposes sacred imperative morally to cosmological and daily activities. We are accustomed with seeing how the Muslim communities attempt to deal with more secular condition of world. However, religiosity arising among urban Muslims often builds on dissatisfaction. The rapid social transformation characterized with industrialization, urbanization, and modernization can result in dislocation and disappointment in certain segments of society like youth, small bourgeois, and middle-class members that are frustrated with inadequate social mobility and they are always ready to protest (Ismail 2006: 11-13).

Therefore, in addition to demonstrating peaceful and moderate forms of Islam, Vedi Hadiz thinks that Indonesia can also be used to exemplify easily the danger of religious violence and intolerance in democracy, particularly because of the activities of vigilante groups that uses religion to justify their presence [15].

Meanwhile, the urban middle-class Muslims that are well-established economically actually face some problems in the social-cultural aspect of their identity. There is a feeling of insecurity because their lives become more individualistic. Shortly, their social-economic status has improved, but their wellbeing is endangered. Fearing of losing their identity, this just reborn Muslim makes religion the basis of their communal experience. To them, religion offers the secure feeling in the world and hereafter. Religion can be a place for people to bind themselves to their community and thereby to be the part of their identity.

Urban middle-class Muslims keep attempting to pursue, to claim, and to promote their religious understanding (conception) and Islam identity, tending to be exclusive and to receive difference reluctantly. These communal religious identity-based groups have currently compiled strength and presented social-political challenges in both national and local politics, particularly in general election, economic and society development, and religious and educational affairs, though their own strength and particularly when they are mobilized massively, as indicated with the stronger Islamic populism.

#### IV. DISCUSSION

The proponents of Islamic populism in Indonesia are generally peaceful, in the sense that they do not endeavor to change Indonesia into an open battle field for the battle between Muslims and non-Muslims and between fellow Muslims with different religious belief and expression. Nevertheless, they often show intolerance in how they debate, promote, and disseminate their perspective on Islam and how they criticize Muslims and non-Muslims who do not have same perspective. This intolerant act in turn often causes dynamicization amid society.

The dynamicization of religious authority has been existing amid society since a long time ago. This religious pattern may embrace certain authority pattern, but the presence of social media changes the authority. If the religious perspective is a total understanding on divinity, it will require religious guidance. In digital society, the authority of religious guidance brings democracy in choosing religious authority. Thus, having theology is the private right to society. To Rumadi (2020), the religious authority is not static but dynamic [16].

The presence of social media in digital society brings new religious authority that worries that fatwa or traditional religious perspective has no longer power. They are as if "torn" by status quo by the social media's alternative critical voice. The offline religious leaders who have educational institution lose their power gradually. Ironically, various social media platforms like Facebook, Tiktok and Youtube do not provide adequate space for apparently formal and boring theological discourse [17]. Indonesian netizens prefers listening to simply, trivial, funny religious lectures conforming to their life problem.

The shift of religious authority in Indonesia has resulted in a new trend of people paying more attention, following even in certain positions, believing in fatwas issued personally compared to institutional fatwa. Popular (Islam) religious leaders like Ustadz Abdul Somad, Ustadz Adi Hidayat, Ustadz Hannan Attaki, Ustadz Firanda, Gus Baha, etc. are potential to get many people's sympathy to follow what they said. In addition, digital media now becomes alternative source of education to the society. Many religious groups utilize digital platform to campaign for their teachings through social media. Through Instagram platform, for example, *salafi* groups campaigned for religious understanding by raising hastag (e.g., *bungabankharam*, *musicharam* etc).

Religious expression in virtual world results in what Campbell [18] called "networked religion", characterized with the appearance of networking community (e.g. *komunitas pemuda hijrah*). Religious articulation in cyberspace not only provides insight into religious attribute online, but also helps explain the recent trend in religious practice and even social interaction in the networking society. In fact, the studies on religious communities in digital society signals that there has been an easing of traditional religious affiliation and the establishment of new religious network based on shared perspective, cultural tendency and understanding more appropriate to online media. It is in this position that social media have an impact on the construction of religious identity, in this case Islamic populism.

#### V. CONCLUSION

Islamic populism is a social mobilization movement based on the asymmetric cross-class unity with Islamic ideals, particularly in the term of morality and social justice. Islamic populism in the context of power politics in democratization process sees the broader social context, in which people or *populus* do social reposition. The presence of digitization through social media also has an impact on social reposition among the holders of religious authority. It is triggered by democratization in digital society to

choose which religious guidance or religious authority they love or believe (private theology). Many youngsters or students are not aware of understanding or ideology, in this case Islamic populism. Thus, through social media the Islamic populism can run effectively and efficiently.

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