INTERSECTIONALITY OF POLITICS AND RELIGION IN GLOBAL POPULISM TOWARDS COVID-19 PANDEMIC RESPONSES

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 has forced all countries to implement various policies to reduce the number of spreads. The biggest challenges in handling the pandemic mostly come from the public's perception towards COVID-19, which follows the same pattern or is strongly influenced by political views and religious beliefs, where both meet in a populist trend. A rife outbreak of populism had colored the world even before the pandemic. Presidential elections in the US, Brexit in Europe, and the presidential election in Indonesia have become a battleground for populist views that have created such polarization. The polarization hinders most of the implementation of government policies and has also affected the handling of the pandemic. Besides that, the existing polarization in society has been aggravated by the growing distortion and misinformation regarding COVID-19. Even when, scientifically, the COVID-19 vaccine can be made and distributed. Conspiracy theories with political and religious backgrounds are the most widely used basis for doubts about the reality and handling of COVID itself. Even worse, various groups do not believe in COVID-19 or refuse vaccines, even in high-literacy countries. This paper will examine the importance of religious leaders' views in mitigating the effect of global populism, which has been a real challenge for COVID-19 handling and policy.

Keywords: Anti-Vaccine, COVID-19, Global Populism, Politics and Religion, Pandemic Responses.

INTRODUCTION

Before the popularity of COVID-19, populism had appeared as one of the appealing global issues. Especially when former United States (US) President Donald Trump and the British Exit (Brexit) rose due to populist revolts in significant constituencies. During the current era of global populism, religion is used as a substantial component of the populist brings in such issues. According to Yilmaz and Morieson (2021), states such as India, Indonesia, and even the US, commonly use religion, language, and concepts to enlarge their political identities and stimulate public support. The interpretation of populism is usually divided into various forms,

such as right-wing, nativist, left-wing, nationalist, and civilizations populism. In typical cases, the relationship between religion to right-wing populism has proven particularly potent. Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity have been commandeered by right-wing populist leaders and parties, most often in the service of a populist program in which religion helps to define a 'virtuous community, a community that can then be mobilized against 'elites' and 'others' who are categorized as a threat to this community. Significantly, while right-wing populism is generally nationalist in orientation, the addition of religion allows populists to define the virtuous community in religion-based civilizational terms. Brubaker (2017) argued that by constructing 'the opposition between self and other not in narrowly national but in broader civilizational terms, right-wing populists had created religious populisms defined by major world religions, which they can wield against religious minorities within their nations.

Global Populism

Benjamin Moffit mapped out four approaches to understanding populism in various contemporary studies, namely populism as an ideology, strategy, discourse, or political logic. Moffit himself formulated a populist approach as a political style. Stanley (2017) also seems to have a similar view of populism as a political strategy that works both in forming ideational views and certain socio-cultural positions that influence the formation of discourses, opinions, or even definite patterns of action that are the goals of the strategy. Moffit and Stanley also considered that global information and communication technology plays a significant role in the populist approach. Even when domestic political contestation is the aim of those strategies, a discourse will have more effects when it rises as global discourse. Besides that, populist political strategies in one country are also possible and paradoxically almost immediately imitated and reproduced in other countries. This phenomenon has prompted a new characteristic of the populist movement as a global phenomenon.

The essence of populism is often confused with the quintessence of democracy, namely, the people's voice. It is said that both populists and supporters of democracy usually focus on strengthening people's voices and that populism is also considered a bad democratic practice (bad democracy) (Espejo, 2017). The long debate between good and bad democracy has led to many dilemmas and controversies because, in a democracy, the voice of the people is the voice of God. When people elect a leader or a policy considered flawed, is it immediately a result of a populist strategy, or do other aspects exist that may not be entirely related to populism? This question is often used as a shield for populists to ward off criticism, denying the people's choice and the democratic process. In this context, populism encourages democracy to reformulate its arguments. One of them is by reviewing the vulnerability of the democratic process to populism because it often emphasizes procedural democracy rather than substantial. In Indonesia, for example, the era of the New Order

continued to claim that the general election, or political process in general, was organized democratically. Democracy places the people as the primary goal, while populism turns people into the means to achieve the goal. Global populism is a challenge to maintain democracy in a substantial context.

Another challenge is regarding the characteristics of the people themselves. Redefining the people's voice is also very complex because the people have different views about their position in the democratic process. In global populism, the affirmation of this position is also influenced by preferences formed through preferences for information obtained from both social media and other media in digital form, which often contains distortion and disinformation. The flood of information does not necessarily encourage most people to make a healthy and balanced choice, but rather to make a choice based on personal preferences that are prone to receiving less balanced information. Then, these characteristics are used by populists to carry out their strategy.

In carrying out its strategy, populism approaches various aspects which can encourage people to make such views an inseparable part of individual "free" choices and "in accordance" with their worldview, ideology, and even religion. In this context, the intersectionality of politics, religion, social, and culture becomes unavoidable. This phenomenon possibly happens through massive information technology but can still be personalized, as in the case of Cambridge Analytica. The "adjustment" of strategic issues with religious views is widely used and seems effective. In the right way, it can encourage people to believe that their choices have a double value, namely to benefit the world's life and become their religious devotion. For example, the European anti-migrant wave is also widely associated with religious views. In addition, the anti-vaccine perspective also comes from religious groups using the doctrines they believe are related to the dangers of vaccines. In the next section, we will discuss populism and religion in more detail.

Religion and Populism

Religion has re-emerged over the past three decades as a critical calculation in residential and universal legislative issues, to the shock of numerous researchers. The noticeable developing quality of religion in legislative issues is clear in populist talk overwhelming political life worldwide. Hence, to uncover the exceptional nature of the relationship between religion and legislative issues within the 21st century, it is better to encourage inquiry about the marvel through the focal points of populism. Religion—in its different forms—is giving prolific ground not as it were in building a responsive audience—" the unadulterated people" of populists—but moreover provides significant and exceedingly important materials which help populists make "us" versus "them" polarities, and in sustaining these divisive doubles (DeHanas and Shterin, 2018).

Populism, by its exceptional nature, joins itself to "thick" philosophies. In this respect, especially for right-wing populism, religion(s) rises as an irreplaceable have, which is obvious in right-wing populism's approach to the issue of sex (Stanley, 2017). This connecting populism to religion makes a difference populists turn religion into an instrument of control combination inside social orders in which religion plays a vital social part. In connection to this, Case's examination of participation between previous US President Donald Trump and a few driving devout figures from the sexual orientation point of view is very illustrative. Past this, populism's Manichean character, or its division of the world into categories of "good" and "evil," imitates fundamentalist religion. Manichean here alludes to the old religion known as Manichaeism and named after its author, the prophet Mani, which is "traditionally characterized as having instructed an expound myth portraying an infinite war between two co-eternal powers of light and darkness." Whereas the natural religion cannot be decreased to this myth, the term "Manichean" is frequently utilized to depict devout and mainstream belief systems which represent the world in basic, dualistic terms, particularly in terms of a fight between tremendous and fiendish or us vs. them (DeHanas & Shterin, 2018; Yilmaz & Morieson, 2021).

However, populism, indeed when not connected to a religion, may act as a kind of common confidence insofar because it sacralizes "the people," raising them over the "evil" and degenerate elites and other populists charge with being "enemies of the people." A populist pioneer may be recognized or depicted as a messianic figure or guardian angel. Similarly, populism may join itself only to one perspective of religion: devout personality. Populism may subsequently end up identitarian and put individuals in categories of "good" and "evil" based on their devout recognizable proof (as contradicted to their genuine devout convictions and hones). The devout character can be valuable, as we might see, indeed, to common populists since stripped of all otherworldly and moral lessons; religion holds the control to characterize people groups, societies, values, and—important to identarian populists—civilizations. Furthermore, these things, much more than "faith" and ethics, are imperative to populist lawmakers.

In line with the slant towards a more insightful examination of religion and legislative issues, researchers have started to look at the relationship between religion and populism, having recognized the last mentioned to be a developing marvel progressively vital within the Americas and Europe and one maybe with joins to religion in its distinctive shapes. Be that as it may, advance investigate is required to refine and elucidate the relationship between populism and religion, particularly past the religion and populist radical right parties of Western Europe, which have so distant been the most objects to think about. Numerous of these works are undoubtedly centered on Europe and the "identitarian" perspective of religion in right-wing populist developments (Yilmaz & Morieson, 2021). The need for grants on non-Western devout populism is disastrous and nearly mystifying when we consider how

far-reaching the marvel has become. For illustration, Indian Prime Serve Narendra Modi's Hindutva story, Pakistan's Prime Serve Imran Khan's Riyasat-e-Medina, and Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan's Islamist talk and fashion are all sorts of religion-based populist offers. This is often differentiated from Western Europe, where the lion's share of right-wing populist developments utilizes minor devout character, instead of religious conviction and hones, as an identifier of "the unadulterated people." It is additionally shocking that more researchers have fizzled to take note of how populism acts as a surrogate religion, sacralizing "the people," making sacred the people's will, and promising "salvation" to a country in case they choose a specific populist pioneer or party into government (DeHanas & Shterin, 2018).

METHODS

In this research, we argue that qualitative interpretive research will suit this research's final goals. According to Elliot and Timulak (2005), qualitative interpretive research emphasizes understanding the issue or phenomena in their own right without outside perspectives. This research also aims to understand why a phenomenon came with and how it unfolds over time. Accordingly, this research will use the secondary data collection technique, which gathers data from online sources, such as news, press releases, and online public video. We will interpret the data linked with a relevant theory to validate the relevancy of the data and ensure that the data is correlated with the bringing context, which is global populism and its relations with politics and religion.

ANALYSIS

COVID-19 amid Global Populism

Populism itself is not a new phenomenon, but many circles, including academics, see that currently, especially during the last decade, the world community lives in a time when populism has grown so broadly, intensively, and massively. Symptoms of populism mainly appear with two paradoxical characteristics, namely, on the one hand, strengthening through the democratic process; on the other hand, in line with criticisms of the effectiveness of democracy in dealing with various public problems, both in economic, political, and social issues, among the various events that show symptoms of the rise of populism on a global scale occurring in countries that are considered the mecca of democracy, namely the US and the European Union countries. The victory of Donald Trump and the various controversies equipped with it is proof of the strengthening of the populist movement. It shows that populists can win political contestations in the US and several other countries. Britain's exit from the European Union, also known as Brexit, is also suspected to be related to the strong influence of populism, which has pushed more British public to choose to leave the

European Union. Big countries in Asia and Latin America, such as India and Brazil, are also affected by the strengthening of populism. Not only from their internal countries but also from the populist movement from all over the world.

The emergence of COVID-19 has also immediately become a populist political commodity in various countries. President Trump used jargon, such as the Wuhan Virus, to strengthen public support for political and economic competition with the PRC, which later gave rise to Asian Hate in the US. Brazilian President Bolsorano joined the demonstration with opponents of the movement restriction policy in the early days of Covid-19 in Brazil, which sparked tensions with his cabinet. In the Philippines, President Duterte has instead used his populist power to threaten opponents of the COVID-19 mitigation policy. Indian PM, Narendra Modi, was initially able to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 in the first wave and become one of the centers for vaccine production in Asia apart from China and strengthen public support for India.

Populism is thick in discourse that involves public discussion in various countries regarding the name of the virus and its variants, for example, the Wuhan virus, China virus, English variant, and Indian variant. There is also a war of opinion about the effectiveness of vaccines. It is said that vaccine is no longer in the realm of researchers or the medical world, but the general public also contains a preference for which country the vaccine is made. This discourse is also used by anti-vaccine groups to devise strategies and potentially influence more people to refuse the vaccine.

Another symptom of populism that occurred during the COVID-19 outbreak is the return of the country's tendency to prioritize only domestic needs in vaccine supply. Public support has been strong for their government at the domestic level, which has been criticized internationally for having an abundant supply and not sharing it adequately with other countries in need. This is worrying because vaccines ideally must be used as a tool for political bargaining and hegemony domestically and internationally.

At the international organization level, doubts about the WHO's competence in managing cooperation between countries and other parties in dealing with pandemics appeared. It mainly talks about the obstacle to compliance with the same standard of care and the fair distribution of vaccines. This doubt is also one of the arguments used by populist groups, one of which is by proponents of conspiracy theories, who consider the WHO and other international organizations to be part of a global elite that wants to target groups that are considered a threat.

At the individual level, Stanley (2017) stated that the success of populism, among others, is the ability to unite populist issues with the ideational structure of society, which in turn to a motivation for action which shows how strongly the problem is embedded in one's ideas. This statement can be seen from the rise of the powerful polarity of public opinion. In the last decade, the public has been affiliated

with certain socio-political choices such as pro/anti-Trump, pro/anti-Brexit, pro/anti-immigrant, and others. In such situations when COVID-19 hit, it can be seen how public opinion was immediately divided along with heated debates, especially at first those who believed and did not believe in COVID-19, pro/anti-vaccine. Because each of these beliefs is ideologically entrenched, it is arduous to change their views. This is a significant challenge for handling and mitigating COVID-19 in various countries. It is even worse for countries that have previously been hit by polarity in political views. In the United States, anti-vaccine groups are also the majority of groups who dislike President Biden's leadership.

Religious issues in the war of political opinion have resurfaced in the opinion war against COVID-19 and its vaccine. These issues are mainly operationalized through hoax news and responses to news stories containing information on the COVID-19 treatment or vaccine failure. This situation is even more difficult because many religious figures support and even participate in spreading disinformation related to COVID-19 and vaccines. Similar figures also have experience winning public opinion in political contestations using populist strategies. In this context, the world is not only facing COVID-19 but also facing a war of opinion that is hampering the handling of the pandemic. In Indonesia, one of the community's actions that reflects this is the belief that health facilities have infected many people. This is the reason for forcibly taking patients or their family's bodies because they want to be buried according to religious law and not through the COVID-19 protocol. In the US, the anti-vaccines gave the example of Jesus, who was never vaccinated. In Indonesia, religious figures also conveyed the example of the Prophet Muhammad. Although many people criticized and straightened the facts, not a few people also believed the news because religious leaders said it.

COVID-19 and Global Religious Leader's Response

As the emergence of COVID-19 has risen, the political and religious leaders have given clear responses regarding how they see COVID-19 as a human threat, especially regarding the change that must be applied to the practice of religious activities, such as praying and big day celebrations. Since the first time COVID-19 was announced as a global pandemic in March 2020, various political and religious leaders have shown different responses. They are indirectly making some patterns of their view regarding COVID-19. The discussions on the opinions of religious leaders or religious institutions on global populism are essential for understanding global populism during the pandemic because even though some of the responses support the government's prompt and appropriate policies and actions related to handling COVID-19. Precisely at the grassroots level, there are still many denials regarding the existence of a pandemic, with arguments for religious beliefs or beliefs. This is illustrated by various posts uploaded by the public on social media.

The response we adapted from several secondary sources shows the generalization of the response of each religion. We divide the response period into three types: December 2019 to June 2020, July 2020 to December 2020, and from early January to the middle of 2021, July. We mainly use this because some turning points made these periods necessary. The first period is taken from the first six months of cases spreading, where the public (including) religious leaders have not received definite information (still monitoring) on the development of the COVID-19 virus. This can also be seen in many countries' policies, which can be pretty chaotic, and there has been no initiation to make vaccines (Novelli et al., 2020; Wu, Chen, & Chan, 2020). The next period is taken six months later, generally marked by the initiative of major countries, such as the United States, United Kingdom, and Russian Federation, to investigate the virus's origin. This also raises a slight suspicion towards China, as the country is suspected to be the origin of the virus. In this period, religious leaders began to respond, although only religious leaders from major religions, such as Islam, Christianity, and Catholicism. Major policies, such as implementing the Hajj for Muslims and Christmas celebrations, usually centered in the Vatican, have been stopped due to the virus outbreak (Aljazeera, 2021; Syakriah, 2020). And in the third period, which started in 2021, minority religious leaders or branched religions began to give their views on COVID-19. Not so many, but quite controversial, especially religious groups driven by political motives, such as Evangelical Christians in the United States (Lovett, 2021).

First Period of COVID-19 Outbreak (December 2019 until June 2020)

We argue that in this period, the religious leaders still prioritized faith's power as the cure for facing COVID-19. For Islam, especially in dominant countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Saudi Arabia, COVID-19 is perceived as a warning from Allah SWT (The Almighty God) for human stinginess towards the universe. This can be shown from interviews and articles by numerous Islamic religious leaders, such as Abdullah Gymnastiar in Indonesia, Khalid Latif in the USA (Newshour, 2020), and Sheikh Ibrahim Lathome in Kenya. Eventually, there has no objection to the government's regulation. However, in this period, most of the Mosques, especially in Asia and Africa, were still open for having a significant number of religious practices, for example, Friday prayer.

On the other hand, Christians and Catholics (especially in dominant countries in Europe and most of Latin America) responded similarly to Islam. If talking philosophically, COVID-19 can be translated as Jesus' punishment for humans who are ignorant about nature and are far from worshiping Him. In the first period of the COVID-19 outbreak, most churches are still open, even in minority countries, such as Indonesia (Syakriah, 2020). There is no particular restriction to praying, but it also does not reject the existence of COVID-19.

There was no further response regarding this matter for other religions, such as Hindus, Buddhists, and Judaism. Some countries with these religions' membership, such as India, China, Thailand, and even Israel, had not calculated as countries with big cases. Besides that, other religions and beliefs (not categorized from the major religions) also gave no response regarding the emergence of COVID-19 and religious practices. According to WHO (2020), the number of COVID-19 infections in remote (indigenous) areas is undetected, reaching only 0.2% of the total cases worldwide. Overall, it shows that in the first period of the COVID-19 outbreak, religion's use as a tool for spreading populism has not been raised seriously. Indeed, all the countries were focused on handling such emerging and unexpected pandemic attacks.

Second Period (July to December 2020)

In the second period, we recorded more than 124,000 news regarding religion's role in COVID-19 awareness. This is interesting since this phenomenon is coming together with other political events, such as the US election, the official statement of Brexit, some controversial European leaders' policies towards non-Europeans, and so on. Even tragedies, such as civil war and border disputes, appeared from mid to the end of 2020. This cannot be a basic assumption for us, but it is always a possible reason populism brings religion as a tool for catching the public's attention. For Islam (especially in dominant countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia, most Muslim-dominated countries practice "trust in the leader" like they understand the existence of a caliph (Khalifah) on earth. This means what the religion decides for the ummah. Therefore the ummah must follow them.

The pattern is also applied to Christians and Catholics (especially in dominant countries in Europe and much of Latin America). Unlike Latin America, most European countries did not consider religion in public policy. In most news, no other sources called European populism have a religious basis. In contrast, only the Vatican officially announced its empathy for the COVID-19 cases and sent its support for the government to set the best policy to eradicate the instances.

The interesting response came from Hinduism (especially in Indonesia and dominant countries like India). We assume that the presence of COVID-19 must be responded to with practices to bring God's blessings. As in India, the practice of bathing together and covering the body with cow dung (2020) was chosen as an effort to bring God's help. This has led to a spike in cases in India. This misunderstanding implies that religious leaders have a significant effect on their people. Even in India, this assumption could not help the political leader, Narendra Modi, make rational assumptions in making policy, as it has been known that PM Modi is a devout Hindu. For other religions, such as Judaism and Buddhism, there had no apparent response regarding how COVID-19 relates to or affects their practice of religion.

Newest Adaptation (January to July 2021)

In 2021, COVID-19 was not new for everyone, even religious leaders. Most people have been tired of the situation, many policies have been applied, and the vaccine initiative has been started. Therefore, for some people, the discourse of anti-vaccine, anti-COVID-19, and even anti-government has risen as a response to the unclear information regarding the future forecasting of the cases. Islam still sees COVID-19 as a form of warning from Allah SWT, but what is good here is faith that following the orders of a good leader means following the commands of Allah SWT. Only several minor extremists and unknown Islamic movements do not consider COVID-19 as a human threat.

Christians and Catholics (especially in dominant countries in Europe and most of Latin America) are more cooperative, evidenced by several virtual dialogues held by priests around the world. Likewise, Pope Francis has stated firmly for Catholics to get closer to God and limit the direct religious practice. In contrast to the United States, which tends to be dominated by evangelical Christians who believe COVID-19 is part of an evil demon approaching the earth. Hence, other religions show a similar pattern as the previous period. The open sources also support this fact showed by the majority, Islam, Catholics, and Christians, to give clear rules to their followers.

Those familiar statements are not applied to some small religious communities, which tend to be more respectful to their religious leaders. For example, in Indonesia, the community of Front Pembela Islam (FPI) prefers to follow their leader, Rizieq Shihab, for not taking some government protocols (read: wearing masks, limiting mobilization, etc.) (Oktaviani, 2021). This phenomenon is also applied to some Evangelical Christian leaders in the United States (especially in the era of President Donald Trump). They opposed government regulations, although the US tended to be not that serious in handling COVID-19 before Biden's administration. In England or the United Kingdom, people follow the Queen (Elizabeth II) to show their respect and indirectly signal the kingdom to be more considerate to the people (especially after Brexit). In Africa, big religions, such as Islam and Christianity, cooperate more with the United Nations organization. Once in October 2020, the UN initiated a COVID-19 protection project with religious leaders to persuade people to wear masks, wash their hands, and apply social distancing (WHO, 2020). At this moment, these facts are taken from various sources, potentially implying political bias and some unknown agendas.

CONCLUSION

Thus, the role of religious leaders becomes very major in overcoming challenges and obstacles motivated by religious views. This role is not only limited to rhetorical actions but also concrete actions, which can appear as good examples and inspire those who previously doubted or did not believe in COVID-19 and vaccines. In addition, strategic efforts are needed to counter the populist strategy. Social media is a crucial battlefield; apart from associations/congregations to which the community is affiliated, religious leaders also use it to express support for the world of science during this pandemic because religion and science are often placed side to side.

Furthermore, populism, both before and after the pandemic, shows a wedge between politics and religion. In the context of religious populism, both have long been connected as media in building a political support base. In global populism, this is reflected in discourses at the elite and public levels. Does that mean the slice should be removed? Of course, the intersectionality of politics and religion is required at a certain level with a certain balance.

In a healthy democracy, being someone who has faith is a right that the state must protect. But, of course, without sacrificing other rights, including the right to access health care and others. Religious leaders must understand, and further show their followers that the policy for handling COVID-19 and the vaccination program do not conflict with religious values, which are needed to maintain life.

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