

## **HARMONY AND DEMOCRACY: THE INFLUENCE OF RELIGION AND POPULISM IN THE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE OF THE 2020 MEDAN CITY REGIONAL HEAD ELECTION**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This research aims to discuss the influence of religion as wasyatiyah democracy in the rise of the populism phenomenon in Indonesia, with a special focus on electoral contestation in Medan city in 2020. Religion, especially Islam, has an inherent role in the lives of Indonesians as a guide to life that regulates relationships between people and with God. This research uses a qualitative phenomenological approach to understand how religion can strengthen popular democracy in the face of the rise of populism in contemporary politics. It found that religion has a strong history in Indonesian politics, entering peacefully and emphasizing inclusivism and acculturation with local culture. Populism in Indonesia is often triggered by dissatisfaction with representative democracy and used as a mass mobilization strategy by charismatic leaders. This research examines the relevance of religion in the context of the rise of populism in Medan city, and argues that the utilization of religion does not always have a negative impact. On the contrary, religion can serve as wasyatiyah, strengthen electoral democracy, and unite various social classes in politics. This research offers a solution in the form of increasing people's critical awareness in reconstructing the deliberative and transformative spirit of religion to ensure that religion is used constructively in the contestation of electoral democracy.

**Keyword: Democracy, Harmony, Political Regional, Populism, Religion.**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The intersection of populism and religion is a multifaceted and intricate phenomenon, particularly evident in regions with a predominant religious majority such as Indonesia. The rise of populism in Indonesia is significantly influenced by religious dynamics, as explored by Vedi R. Hadiz in his book, *Islamic Populism in Indonesia and the Middle East* (2016). Hadiz outlines how populism in Indonesia manifests through the strategic integration of democratic principles with religious values, utilizing religion as a foundation for mobilization, uniting various social classes to gain political and resource control. This interplay between populism and religion is critical to understanding the political landscape during electoral cycles, where differences and competition are inherent. However, maintaining unity and avoiding polarization is essential, as emphasized by KH Yahya Cholil Staquf, Chairman of the Nahdlatul Ulama Executive Board. In his address at the ASEAN Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue Conference (IIDC) on August 7, 2023, he

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highlighted the potential of religion to shape economic and political policies while rejecting divisive religious primordialism. He advocated for a consolidation of a large civilizational constituency that promotes harmony, tolerance, and peace, thereby mitigating the tendency for religious conflicts (Indiraphasa, 2024). The relationship between religion and populism in Indonesia necessitates an inclusive approach, reopening discourse on the influence of religion in electoral democracy. It is vital to align religious doctrines with democratic practices, ensuring that the rise of populism with religious undertones does not deviate towards rigid doctrinal interpretations that could foster polarization. The concept of Wasathiyah, which promotes fairness, balance, and proportionality, plays a crucial role in this context. As long as religious doctrine remains within the realm of fluid political *ijtihad* without coercion or repression, it can positively contribute to political discourse (Kansong et al., 2022).

Despite the controversies surrounding religious politics, its emotional mobilization strategy remains a significant aspect of electoral campaigns. Contestants often leverage religious sentiments to enhance their chances of victory, which suggests that religious politics will continue to influence future electoral strategies. However, if religious doctrines are employed rigidly and absolutistically, it could provoke popular resistance and potential crises, signaling a strengthening of populist movements as expressions of dissatisfaction among the populace against the elites (Ahnaf & Lussier, 2019). The founding fathers of Indonesia provided a model of resolving conflicts through a transformative approach that embraces diversity and inclusivity. The history of Indonesian nationalism is replete with examples of inclusive religious views, emphasizing consensus and unity over division. The agreement to remove the "seven words" from the Jakarta Charter during the formulation of the 1945 Constitution exemplifies the willingness to prioritize peace and egalitarian political structures, ensuring equal rights and obligations for all citizens regardless of their religious backgrounds (Nasution et al., 2023). Indonesia's large religious civil societies, Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama, act as moral buffers, preventing the nation from experiencing social, political, and cultural bankruptcy. Their inclusive religious character helps mitigate the polarizing effects of religious populism. This study aims to analyze the influence of religion on the rise of populism in electoral democracy, particularly in the context of the 2020 Medan city regional head election (Fauzan et al., 2024).

By examining how religion and populism interact in the electoral arena, this research seeks to determine whether religion strengthens or weakens popular democracy in Indonesia. It will explore the use of Wasathiyah in religious politics and its potential to foster a more dynamic and inclusive democratic process. The findings will contribute to the broader discourse on populism, religious doctrine, and their combined impact on democratic practices in Indonesia, offering insights into the strategies used in national and regional electoral contests, with a specific focus on the 2020 Medan city election. This research aims to enrich the understanding of populism by exploring the nuanced role of religion, positioning it as a force that can potentially enhance democratic participation rather than as an impediment. By highlighting the positive aspects of religious influence on democracy, this study seeks to offer a balanced perspective on the interplay between religion, populism, and democratic development in Indonesia.

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### **METHOD**

This research uses a qualitative approach with phenomenological methodology to understand the influence of religion on the rise of populism in electoral contestation, especially in the 2020 Medan City regional head election. The research subjects were selected based on their experience of the phenomenon under study using purposive sampling technique (Moleong, 2017). Data were collected through observation and in-depth interviews with political party leaders, academics, and community leaders, as well as media observation and related documents. Data analysis was conducted using triangulation and expert judgment to ensure data validity (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The phenomenological analysis process involves a thorough description of the phenomenon, inventory and classification of questions, as well as textual and structural descriptions to reveal the meaning of religious influence in populism. Data analysis techniques include data reduction, data presentation and conclusion drawing (Miles et al., 2013).

### **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

#### **The Role of Religion in Indonesian Democracy and Populism**

Democracy is widely understood as a political system that accommodates various group interests through shura (deliberation), an essential component in addressing social issues. In Indonesia, democracy is seen as the people's participation in regulating the government's course in a sovereign state. Throughout its history, Indonesia has experimented with various democratic systems, from presidential and parliamentary democracies during Soekarno's era to the guided democracy of the New Order (Aspinall, 2019). At the founding of Indonesia, there were significant debates between religious and nationalist camps during the BPUPKI sessions. The religious camp advocated for a state based on religious principles, while the nationalist camp emphasized a secular, unified nation. This debate culminated in the Jakarta Charter, which was later modified to remove the clause mandating Islamic law for Muslims. This modification, which led to the adoption of Pancasila, is often seen as a major concession by Muslims to uphold national unity (Amin & Ritonga, 2022). Indonesian religious communities initially viewed democracy as a means to ensure freedom of belief and worship within the bounds of religious norms. Democracy, thus, was seen as compatible with religious values, emphasizing freedom that respects religious provisions. Pancasila democracy, likened it to local forms of democracy practiced by Indonesian tribes for centuries. Religious practice in Indonesia has always been intertwined with local culture, shaping a unique form of democracy that includes religious values. That religion often challenges democracy by legitimizing cultural norms, not as reinforcement but as a controlling mechanism. This legitimacy process aims to align culture with religious values, filtering out what is seen as incompatible.

Despite the differences between religion and democracy—one divine, the other human-constructed—they can complement each other. Religion supports democratic principles such as brotherhood, pluralism, equality, and consultation. Nurcholis Madjid and Syarifuddin Jurdi highlighted that although democracy is not explicitly found in religious texts, its principles are not inherently contradictory to religious values. Religion should harmonize with democracy by embodying values like justice, equality, deliberation, and voluntarism, as emphasized by Dr. Francis Fukuyama. Interpreting these principles within a

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religious context can enhance democracy, adhering to the prophetic values of benefit, justice, and tolerance. The use of populism influenced by religious doctrines is evident in various political contestations in Indonesia, such as the 2014 and 2019 presidential elections, the 2017 Jakarta regional head elections, and the 2020 Medan mayoral election. In these elections, both Jokowi and Prabowo utilized populist strategies to influence voter behavior, leveraging the religious sentiments of Indonesia's predominantly Muslim population (Sembiring et al., 2023). During the 2014 and 2019 presidential elections, Jokowi and Prabowo employed religious populism to mobilize voter emotions. Jokowi gained significant support from Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and nationalist groups, using religious populism to increase his chances of victory. Similarly, Prabowo adopted an anti-foreigner narrative, tapping into nationalist and religious sentiments. Religious populism was also prominent in the 2017 Jakarta regional head election, where Anies Baswedan and Sandiaga Uno capitalized on accusations of blasphemy against the incumbent, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama. This strategy was supported by conservative Islamic groups, significantly influencing the election outcome. In the 2018 North Sumatra governor election, religious populism was evident in the victory of Edy Rahmayadi and Musa Rajekshah, who secured votes from Muslim-majority regions. Their opponents, Djarot and Sihar, found support in predominantly Christian areas, highlighting the role of religious identity in electoral politics.

The 2015 Medan city head election between Dzulmi Eldin-Akhyar Nasution and Ramadhan Pohan-Eddie Kusuma did not prominently feature religious populism as a strategy. However, the 2020 Medan mayoral election saw an increase in voter participation, partly due to the influence of religious values on voter preferences. In the 2020 Medan mayoral election, Bobby Nasution, supported by a coalition of nationalist and Islamic parties, won against Akhyar Nasution, who was backed by the Prosperous Justice Party and the Democratic Party. The participation rate increased compared to the 2015 election, indicating a growing role of religion in mobilizing voters (Simandjuntak, 2021). Religion plays a significant role in Indonesian democracy and populism, influencing voter behavior and electoral outcomes. The rise of religious populism in electoral politics, as seen in various regional and national elections, highlights the interplay between religious values and democratic principles. This phenomenon suggests that religion can be a positive force in democracy, fostering political participation and supporting democratic values without necessarily leading to polarization. The increasing voter participation in Medan's 2020 election underscores the importance of religion in shaping electoral politics, indicating its potential to strengthen democratic processes in Indonesia.

### **Religion and Populism in Political Mobilization**

In both regional and national democratic contests, populist groups often mobilize emotional reinforcement and political power by positioning themselves against the elite. These groups invoke "moral politics" to rally support, frequently utilizing religious doctrines as symbols, narratives, and rhetoric. By framing issues as a struggle against corrupt elites, religious populists promise that supporting their resistance movement will resolve the crises faced by the people. Emile Durkheim & Bellah (1973) defined religion as a system of beliefs and practices related to sacred matters within society. HAMKA emphasized that Islamic law can regulate and facilitate social interactions, aiming to create a harmonious, peaceful, and

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prosperous society. According to Kaltwasser (2017), religion has two dimensions in the context of populism. The first dimension involves a narrowly defined religiousness, focusing on the relationship with the divine, fulfilling God's wishes, and opposing perceived enemies of God. The second dimension involves the political use of religion, where religious symbols and rhetoric are employed to organize groups and pursue secular missions. This politicization of religion fundamentally alters the landscape of political conflict, framing it in moral and transcendent terms.

Using religion as a political tool involves mobilizing the moral resistance of the people through religious doctrine. Political actors recognize the powerful influence of religiosity on the political process and leverage this for pragmatic political gains. Observed that the instrumentalization of religion and religious politics in populism is complex and often overlaps. The boundaries between using religion for genuine spiritual purposes and for political mobilization are frequently blurred. This means not conflating religious interpretations with political affairs or treating them as matters of faith equivalent to issues of the hereafter. The use of religion in politics should be scrutinized to ensure it is not immoral. Identity politics and religious politics should focus on the broader benefit of national and state development, guided by progressive and noble religious principles (Lubis et al., 2024). Religion plays a significant role in the political mobilization strategies of populist movements. By invoking religious doctrines, populist leaders can effectively rally support against perceived corrupt elites, promising to address societal crises. However, the use of religion in politics must be carefully managed to avoid identity politics and ensure that religious principles are applied in ways that benefit the broader society and support democratic processes (Yilmaz, 2023).

### **Characteristics of Islam as Rahmatan lil 'Alamin**

Islam unequivocally condemns all forms of violence, whether physical or mental, as it prohibits acts that lead to societal discord and prevent peace, harmony, and coexistence. The perception of religious populism as threatening often stems from the rigid and absolute doctrines seen in some Muslim-majority countries. In Indonesia, however, the face of Islam has traditionally been inclusive, avoiding multiple interpretations and prioritizing peaceful coexistence. Islam, like all major religions, advocates for harmony and peace among its followers. It teaches love, tolerance, and peaceful relations irrespective of ethnic, national, or religious differences. Peace is fundamental to fostering good relations, ensuring safety, tranquility, and happiness. Despite this, hostilities can arise, often fueled by identity issues, especially during democratic contests. Islam emphasizes brotherhood, encouraging unity among people through tolerance and mutual support. Brotherhood in Islam aims to promote cooperation and assistance in pursuing goodness and truth, fostering a peaceful and prosperous life. This sense of brotherhood is essential to realizing Islam as Rahmatan lil 'Alamin, emphasizing being beneficial to humanity and nature. Furthermore, Islam as Rahmatan lil 'Alamin teaches mutual respect among all humans, regardless of ethnicity, nationality, or religion. It is a tolerant faith, advocating for respect and understanding. Respecting others fosters harmony and is a commendable attitude that should be based on sincerity. Islam encourages the respect of differing opinions, seeing them as blessings that can enhance knowledge and lead to truth.

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Indonesia's history is deeply intertwined with the dynamics and complexity of Islamic politics. Prominent Muslim figures have significantly contributed to the nation's political foundations. In Indonesia, political Islam blends doctrinal and ideological aspects with practical interests, often negotiating space in the public arena. The development of political Islam marks a significant response to modernity, characterized by a desire to embrace globalization while maintaining the significant role of religion in socio-political life. Addressing modernity and globalization in religious politics requires a cooperative approach. Mainstream civil society organizations like Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah play crucial roles in building community awareness and resilience. Ulama, as influential religious leaders, contribute significantly to the nation's historical and socio-political dynamics, often acting as ideologues and pioneers in political Islamic movements. Indonesia's Muslim middle class, comprising over 33% of the population, plays a vital role in democratic growth. Economic stability has increased their spiritual needs, leading to a rise in religious movements. Interaction with technology and global Muslim communities has influenced their religiosity, exposing them to both modernity and globalization.

A robust democracy requires true freedom for minorities to practice their religion. Mohammad Natsir distinguishes between "Islamic Politics," which upholds Islamic values in life, and "Political Islam," which uses Islamic symbols for power. The former is about justice and societal values, while the latter often serves momentary interests, sometimes detrimental to the broader community. Religious populism continues to shape Indonesia's political landscape. The challenge lies in distinguishing between genuine religious movements and those hijacked for political gain. Examples include the Aksi Bela Islam movement, which evolved into a political campaign against certain candidates, highlighting the misuse of religious sentiment. To mitigate rising religious conservatism, Indonesia must promote wasathiyah (moderate Islam) in its political discourse. This involves contextualizing wasathiyah's meaning and implementing strategies to ensure religious politics supports democracy without exacerbating divisions. Emphasizing moderate Islam can reduce the impact of conservative religious movements and enhance democratic stability.

### **Reimagining Political Parties: Embracing Islamic Principles of Moderation**

The research findings underscore the pivotal role of political parties in shaping democratic processes in Indonesia, particularly in Medan City. However, the current state of political parties reflects a departure from their ideal functions as channels for community aspirations and forums for democratic education. Instead, they often prioritize individual interests, corruption, and proximity to power centers. This deviation from their core purpose impedes the realization of democracy's full potential. One significant challenge facing political parties is their failure to prioritize political education for both their members and the wider community. This educational deficit perpetuates a cycle where parties focus solely on winning elections rather than fostering an informed electorate and upholding democratic values. As a result, political parties become mere vehicles for electoral success, neglecting their responsibilities as custodians of democracy. Moreover, the dominance of certain parties in electoral contests raises concerns about fair competition and the integrity of the

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democratic process. Rather than upholding democratic principles, parties prioritize winning at all costs, disregarding the importance of ideological values and ethical conduct.

To address these shortcomings, there is an urgent need for political parties to refocus on their foundational principles and responsibilities. This entails prioritizing political education initiatives that empower both members and citizens with the knowledge and skills necessary for active participation in democratic processes. Additionally, parties must recommit to their role as guardians of democracy, ensuring fair and transparent electoral practices. Furthermore, fostering a culture of accountability and integrity within political parties is essential for restoring public trust and confidence in the democratic system. This requires a concerted effort to combat corruption, prioritize public interests over individual gains, and promote ethical leadership. It is crucial to contextualize these discussions within the broader framework of Islamic teachings, particularly the Qur'anic verse Surah al-Baqarah (2): 143, which emphasizes the importance of moderation and justice. This verse serves as an analytical tool for evaluating the actions and behaviors of political parties in Indonesia. By aligning their practices with the principles of moderation, justice, and ethical conduct outlined in the Qur'an, political parties can contribute to the advancement of democracy and the well-being of society.

### CONCLUSION

The intricate relationship between religion, populism, and democracy in Indonesia, particularly exemplified in the context of the 2020 Medan city regional head election, highlights the multifaceted dynamics shaping the nation's political landscape. This research delves into the interplay of these elements, exploring how religious principles influence the rise of populism and its impact on democratic processes. Throughout Indonesia's history, the fusion of religious values with democratic principles has been both a source of strength and contention. From the founding debates of the nation to contemporary electoral contests, religion has played a significant role in shaping political discourse and mobilizing voter sentiment. The concept of *wasathiyah* (moderation) emerges as a guiding principle, advocating for a balanced approach that fosters harmony, tolerance, and inclusivity within the democratic framework. The analysis of the 2020 Medan city election underscores the complexity of religious populism and its implications for democratic development. Candidates strategically leverage religious sentiments to enhance their electoral prospects, tapping into the emotional resonance of faith to rally support. However, the instrumentalization of religion in politics raises concerns about the potential for polarization and the erosion of democratic norms. Despite these challenges, there are opportunities for positive transformation. Mainstream religious organizations like Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah serve as moral bulwarks, promoting inclusive religious values that mitigate the polarizing effects of religious populism. Moreover, the Muslim middle class, comprising a significant portion of the population, demonstrates a growing commitment to democratic ideals, offering hope for the future of Indonesian democracy. Moving forward, it is imperative for political parties to reevaluate their roles and responsibilities within the democratic framework. By prioritizing political education, fostering accountability, and upholding ethical conduct, parties can contribute to the advancement of democracy and the well-being of society. Grounded in the principles of moderation, justice, and ethical

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governance, political parties have the potential to reimagine their purpose as catalysts for democratic progress. In conclusion, the intersection of religion, populism, and democracy in Indonesia presents both challenges and opportunities for democratic consolidation. By embracing inclusive religious values, promoting democratic principles, and fostering a culture of accountability, Indonesia can navigate the complexities of contemporary politics and forge a path towards a more vibrant and resilient democracy.

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