

Right-Wing Populism and Vigilantism: Comparing Cases of Indonesia and India

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Abstract. This study explores the rise and impact of right spectrum populism in Indonesia and India, focusing in which religious-majority vigilante groups advocate for different interests within the socio-political context. Drawing on comparative method analysis, this research aims to examine the similarities and differences between these two countries, which are considered as significant representations of democracies in Asia. By employing Mill's methods of difference, the study investigates the factors contributing to the emergence and growth of right-wing populism, analyzing political and socio-cultural contexts. Through utilizing this research approach, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics surrounding right-wing populism in Indonesia and India, shedding light on the challenges faced by democratic societies in the face of rising populist movements. The research highlights the role of religious identity, electoral dynamics, and the mobilization of mass support in shaping the ideologies and actions of right-wing populist movements. Furthermore, this research found that populist movements have achieved some degree of political dominance through changes in electoral and legislative realms, they also employed vigilantism as a method to establish the supremacy of the majority religion they claim to represent. At the final section, this study proves the main difference in both countries emerges in the resistance and magnitude of societal polarization and violence.

Keywords: *Right-Wing Populism; Vigilantism; Indonesia; India*

INTRODUCTION

There are diverse interpretations of populism, but at its core, populism emerged as a direct response to the grievances and protests of the people against an increasingly elitist and oligarchical model of representative democracy (Jan-Werner, 2016; Sucitawathi, 2020; Varshney, 1991). The status quo of scholarly research regarding representative democracy is often seen as failing to truly represent the interests of the common citizens, instead favoring the privileged elite and bureaucratic class (Mietzner, 2018). Even political parties

tend to be controlled by the elite and often fail to deliver on their promises to their constituents. Populist movements, as quoted from (Mann, 2005), perceived these elites as a 'corrupt elite', positioning themselves as the voice of the genuine people (referred to as the 'pure people'). Additionally, populism emphasizes the sovereignty of the people, a concept that is frequently overlooked in the political process (Hakim et al., 2023; Rummens, 2017). This perspective often results in a belief that the people share a unified spirit and identity, which can lead to the

exclusion of those whose opinions do not align with this perceived homogeneity.

Populism is viewed as an alternative that amplifies the voices of (Bateson, 2021; Levitsky & Loxton, 2012) ordinary citizens, and it often emerges and gains momentum alongside the rise of charismatic leaders. These leaders are skilled in mobilizing popular support by utilizing communication styles that resonate with the needs of the people. Although populist movements require an ideological foundation, this ideology is not as rigidly defined as ideologies like liberalism, fascism, or socialism (Hadiz, 2017). In fact, populism may even incorporate elements from these ideologies into its activities.

This paper will explore a rising phenomenon of right-wing populism that occurred in Indonesia and India. Both countries are chosen with the justification of its representative capacity as Asia's democratic country. Whilst Indonesia is popular among scholar as a country who practice right wing populism, lesser studies are examined to compare Indonesia with another similar country in practicing their own "democracy". Therefore, this paper ideally could benefit readers to identify the role of religious identity, electoral dynamics, and the

mobilization of mass support in shaping the ideologies and actions of right-wing populist movements.

RESEARCH METHODS

In this research, Mill's methods of difference will be employed as a research method to analyze the impact of right-wing populism in Indonesia and India. Mill's methods of difference involve comparing cases that differ in a single variable while keeping other factors constant (Peters, 1998). The research will analyze the specific factors that contribute to its rise and impact. The method will involve examining historical, political, and socio-cultural contexts in both countries to identify key differences in variables such as political climate, socio-economic conditions, religious dynamics, and government policies. This comparative approach will provide insights into the specific factors that have influenced the emergence and records of right-wing populism in Indonesia and India, contributing to a deeper understanding of the similarities and differences between these two contexts.

DISCUSSION

Ethnic conflicts are something that can occur in diverse societies. However, the adoption of populism political tactic to tackle

the issue of inadequate ethnic inclusion jeopardizes the core principles of democracy (Repucci, 2020; Sachithanatham P, 2021). Indonesia and India have parallel trajectories in operationalizing religion-based nationalism. Both ideologies express discriminatory impulses toward communities deemed "traitors" and naturally become opponents of the "authentic" society. Religious pluralism isn't trying to teach that all religions are the same. Still, it demonstrates that religions have powerful commonalities, even though they each come to those shared values.

Indonesia and India are two prominent examples of democratic countries in Asia. Both countries were initially built on secular principles, but they have both witnessed the emergence of right spectrum populism in the recent decade. This article compares Indonesia and India to examine how vigilante groups based on the majority religion advocate for different interests in the socio-political context.

In Indonesia, right-wing populism initially did not prioritize its agenda in electoral contests (Listari, 2023). Instead, the movement focused on asserting the social privileges derived from the demographic advantage of the Muslim community (Vedi R. Hadiz, 2016). The demand to recognize Islam as the state ideology was advocated for at least three decades during the authoritarian regime under the New Order of Suharto (1966–1998) (Arifianto, 2020; Suryadi &

Bestari, 2023) After the wave of democratization in 1998, right-wing Islamic parties became increasingly marginalized in national politics due to their lack of agenda coherence (Aditya Ramadhan et al., 2022; Hefner, 2019). Since the direct election of the president and vice-president began, allowing coalition-building through party alliances (Agasi et al., 2023; Pinem & Iqbal, 2023), the urgency of ideological identity in Indonesian political practice has been marginalized by pragmatic interests in electoral contests and the desire to seize power. However, this drastically changed in the year 2016 with a charismatic group of preachers benefit the phenomenon of a blasphemy case to organize millions of Muslims in Indonesia with a unite call to "defend" Islam from desecration in their own homeland (Arifianto, 2020; Aspinall & Mietzner, 2019a). This has the potential to polarize Indonesian society and pose a threat to nationalism and pluralism. If this pattern continues, it will also determine the prerequisites for political contests in the coming years (Power & Warburton, 2020).

In the Indonesian context, attempt to incorporate Islamic views as the governing principle for Muslims in the country have been undertaken with no significant results (Menchik, 2019). This is because right-wing populist parties in Indonesia do not have sufficient influence in the parliamentary seat quota to advocate for such reforms (Hadiz, 2021). Even the largest mainstream Islamic organization, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), is

cautious in taking constitutional steps due to ideological diversity among Muslims in Indonesia, making it challenging to reform and adopt the “true” ideology of Islam. On multiple occasions, right-wing populist factions within the parliament, notably the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS), leveraged their political power to bring existing laws in line with their religious moral stance (Aspinall & Mietzner, 2019b). However, these endeavors have encountered setbacks and have not been successful in achieving their goals. A recent illustration of this trend can be seen in the 2019 endeavor to amend the Indonesian Criminal Code (KUHP) with the intention of making adultery and homosexuality punishable offenses.

Regarding Indonesia's democratic evolution, the country's democracy is still in the process of institutionalization (Rahim, 2018). Many argue that populism has adverse effects on the development of democracy. This is illustrated by the case of Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok), who was defeated in a gubernatorial election due to a massive populist movement led by FPI. This movement went so far as to demand Basuki's imprisonment based on the 'will of the people'. Such populist movements can hinder the maturity of Indonesian democracy, particularly as they disregard the democratic principle of equality, wherein all citizens, including minorities, should have the opportunity to lead (Hamayotsu, 2011; Tudor & Slater, 2016).

Supporters of populist democracy contend that populism doesn't undermine democracy but, in fact, serves as a solution to elitist democracy. Populism in Indonesia has become a tool used by political parties, mass organizations, and presidential candidates to secure popular support and overcome their rivals. Nevertheless, as a political strategy, populism can impede the democratic development process. This is particularly significant in the case of Indonesia's relatively growing democratic system. The pursue toward authoritarianism regime, the desire of majority to dominate, and the neglect of fundamental principles of democratic such equality and pluralism, which are inherent in populist movements, could jeopardize democracy. This inclination has led to populism being characterized as 'proto-totalitarian', with the potential to replace the democratic system (Kenny, 2017; Stanley, 2008).

Furthermore, the instrumentalization of religion within populist movements has proven effective in mobilizing masses, but it also obstructs the advancement of democratic values and principles. The utilization of religious sentiments in campaigns to rally the masses has skewed electoral competition, even if the elections themselves are conducted fairly and transparently.

Meanwhile, Hindu nationalists in India have long advocated the country to be a majoritarian state for, futher their attempt to advocate the norms has become into a

populist movement with the rise of Narendra Modi governance in 2014 (Jaffrelot, 2017a; Kaul, 2017). Modi advantage his personal charm and down-to-earth persona to organize widespread backing for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Modi's mass mobilization focused on strengthening the identity of "true Indians," and he even pledged to restore the majority Hindu community in the country to its rightful place after "1200 years of slavery" under foreign Muslim rulers (Anderson & Longkumer, 2018; Van Der Veer, 2021; Varshney, 2019).

Since governing in 2014, the BJP has exhibited a distinct division of labor strategy (Varshney, 2019). In this approach, Prime Minister Modi delegates the task of making bold statements on contentious issues related to Hindutva and other controversial matters to lower-ranking party members, notably party President Amit Shah (Anderson & Longkumer, 2018). Instead of focusing on such contentious topics, Modi's populism during his tenure has predominantly revolved around his image as a "common man" who is engaged in a fight against corruption from within the system (Berenschot, 2020). This self-promotion as an outsider has been evident in various instances, such as his statements in his first Independence Day speech after governing, where he emphasized his humble origins and outsider status in Delhi's elite circles.

The BJP's strategy also involves targeting perceived unpatriotic activities by

what they term as "elites" and other groups (Andersen & Damle, 2019; Kaul, 2017; Kefford & McDonnell, 2018). This is exemplified by the party's decision to suspend foreign funding for numerous domestic civil society organizations, claiming that these groups are working against the national interest. One significant case is that of the Delhi-based Lawyers Collective, which was denied foreign grants due to their representation of individuals critical to Modi's policies, including a prominent advocate for justice in the Gujarat riots (Kefford & McDonnell, 2018; McDonnell & Cabrera, 2019; Subramanian, 2007).

Although the practice of suspending overseas funding for such organizations had commenced during the previous Congress-led government, the trend intensified following the BJP's victory in the 2014 general elections. The number of non-governmental organizations authorized to receive foreign funding decreased significantly, dropping by over 16,000 from a total of more than 40,000 (Sarkar, 2018; Varshney, 2014). This aligns with the observation that populists in power, as highlighted by Müller (2016), often adopt a harsh stance towards nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that criticize their policies. The BJP's behavior in this regard fits within this pattern, reflecting their intolerance for dissenting voices and criticism from civil society groups (Rio Jama, 2021). Subsequently, the BJP's triumph in both national and regional elections has led to

an unparalleled utilization of governmental authority to establish Hindu supremacy and systematic marginalization of religious minority groups within India (Chatterjee, 2019).

Data from India shows significant and polarized vigilante activities at certain moments. The figure below illustrates that high-magnitude vigilantism emerged in mid-2013 during the campaign period for national elections in India. During that time, the BJP promoted the controversial Hindu populist leader Narendra Modi, and his campaign eventually sparked polarization between the Hindu and non-Hindu communities. Proponents of the Hindutva ideology are focused on establishing control over non-Hindu minority communities, particularly Muslims, who have historically been labeled as disloyal to the nation (Akhtar, 2022).

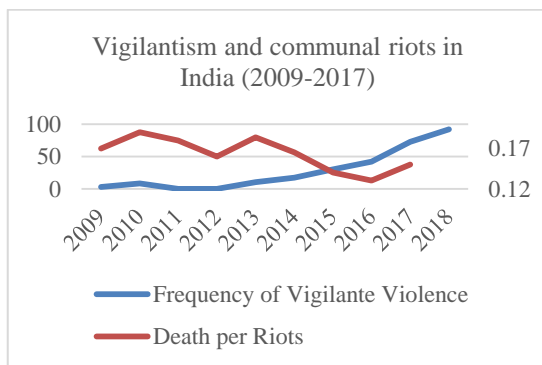


Figure 1. Vigilantism and communal riots in India (2009–2017). Source: (Jaffrey, 2021)

The right-wing populist currently in power in Indonesia has revived religious nationalist ideas that have long been marginalized from political discourse (Hadiz, 2018). By acknowledging the equality of all religions within its constitution, Indonesia

shoulders the duty of formulating and implementing laws that serve to the requirements of diverse religious communities and manage disputes between them (Menchik, 2016). Within Indonesia, Islamists strive not merely for exerting control over non-Muslim minorities from different ethnic backgrounds but also for asserting supremacy within their own existing intra-ethnic Muslim associations. Particularly in this regard, Indonesia has inherited laws on blasphemy from the colonial government, as well as civil laws governing religious offenses, marriage, inheritance, and divorce (Crouch, 2012). Another issue is the regulation of interfaith marriages and restrictions on the construction of places of worship. The engagement of state in religious affairs also implies that religion holds a significant role in the realm of electoral politics. Consequently, even politicians from secular parties in Indonesia engage in mobilization of both majority and minority voter groups by offering commitments of policy accommodations and religious regulations (Jaffrelot, 2017b).

From the perspective of vigilante group, vigilantism seen as an escape from legal strategy to vocalize their rights from bottom up (Jaffrey, 2021). This populist movement are widespread in Indonesia and affirmed with a social legitimacy from its majority people. Social legitimacy makes the movement resilient and transform the interest from local collective to nation-wide. The

Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) attacked some suspected action of blasphemy, demolition of place of worship, and eradicate allegedly religious sects (Mietzner & Muhtadi, 2020; Vedi R. Hadiz, 2016). Over time, these right-wing populist organizations have broadened their agenda to strongly penalize a range of behaviors deemed as "contrary to Islamic principles" such as alcohol sales, adultery, and homosexuality.

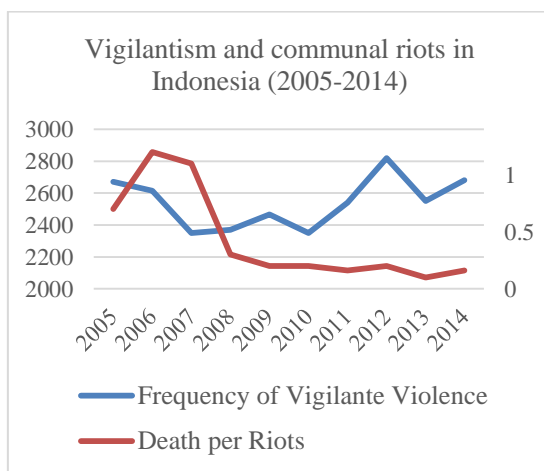


Figure 2. Vigilantism and communal riots in Indonesia (2005–2014). Source: (Jaffrey, 2021)

Data from India and Indonesia indicate a sharp increase in incidents of vigilante violence in the past decade (Figures 1 and 2). Data from India recorded 254 incidents of mass violence targeting religious minorities between 2009 and 2018, resulting in 91 deaths and 579 injuries (Factchecker India, 2019). Around 90% of all recorded cases occurred after the BJP's electoral victory that brought Modi to power in May 2014. From data (Figure 2) Indonesian data traject a much broader types of religious offenses. Not merely blasphemy, vigilante group in

Indonesia also taking part in action regarding bid'ah (among various Islamic ideology), asset looting, and various moral transgressions such LGBT. Data in Indonesia also show a relatively higher magnitude of unrest compared to India, as evidenced by the high number of deaths resulting from vigilantism-related riots.

Whilst in India, even though populism exist, it seems to merely polarize in the momentum of election. Notably, with Narendra Modi's charge on the government, populism in India were more put into concern by scholar. In India, ruling party are the main motor of populist movement. The party's definition in perceiving "the people", "elites" and "others" are shaping the emergence of vigilantism within its social construction, despite the subtle degree of riots. As some scholars claim, governing parties like the BJP soften their populism. We conclude that the BJP can be very fruitfully included in consideration on right-wing populism discussion.

Departing from this context, Indonesia stands apart from any other kind of populism spread around the world due to the absence of extreme left and right-wing populism. Unlike Latin America's historical trajectory of populism back in the 1940s, leftist populism in Indonesia was disrupted by the New Order regime, leading to a lack of alternative narratives akin to those seen in Venezuela. Furthermore, Indonesia's brand of populism is not as radical as the far-right parties observed

in Europe, although inklings of such tendencies can be detected. Notably, the role of Islamic populism, which wasn't extensively discussed earlier, has gained significance, with religion recently becoming a unifying instrument for certain Muslims in Indonesia pursuing specific political objectives.

CONCLUSION

Right spectrum populist movements in Indonesia and India are rooted in the fundamental refusal of the majority religion being the basis for the organization of the state, and further pursue to promoting a preference for secularist state instead. While these movements have achieved some degree of political dominance through changes in electoral and legislative realms, they also employed vigilantism as a method to establish the supremacy of the majority religion they claim to represent. The main difference emerges in the resistance and magnitude of societal polarization and violence. It can be concluded that the productivity of vigilantism in Indonesia is polarized over a long period of time and accommodates grassroots activities, meaning that the phenomenon of vigilantism is not limited to election period.

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