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Prior Studies on Indonesian Populism: Historical Context, Core Elements, and Blind Spots

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Abstract: Populism in Indonesia has been a crucial political phenomenon in recent decades, rooted in the nation's socio-political history. This article examines the historical context, core elements, and blind spots in prior research on Indonesian populism by analyzing 107 scholarly works published between 2001 and 2024 in the Scopus database. The findings reveal that Indonesian populism has evolved through various phases, from anti-colonial nationalist movements to contemporary digital populism, where social media plays a central role in mobilizing mass support and amplifying identity-based political narratives. The author identifies seven core elements shaping Indonesian populism, including its domains, antecedents, mobilization channels, and political consequences. The author also highlights blind spots in previous studies, specifically the limited focus on local-level populism, the long-term economic implications of populist policies, and the deepening societal polarization caused by digital populist discourse. By incorporating comparative perspectives with other Southeast Asian nations, this review broadens the understanding of populism's regional dynamics. The findings contribute to academic discourse on populism and provide insights for policymakers in addressing the challenges posed by populist rhetoric and governance. Future research should explore empirical case studies on local populist movements and assess the impact of populist policies on democratic institutions in Indonesia.

INTRODUCTION

Populism has become one of the most discussed political phenomena in recent decades, both nationally and globally. In many countries, populism emerges as a response to the economic crisis, social discontent, and political impasse felt by the majority of the population (Katsambekis, 2017; Pappas & Kriesi, 2015). Indonesia, as the largest democracy in Southeast Asia, is not immune to this wave of populism. Its emergence is closely related to political dynamics rooted in a plural society's history, culture, and socioeconomic development (Hadiz, 2018a; Latif, 2019; Mietzner, 2020b; Widian et al., 2023). Populism in Indonesia has attracted the attention of many researchers, who examine how populist narratives were used by political actors to mobilize the masses and consolidate their power. Prior studies about it cover various dimensions, ranging from the characteristics of populist rhetoric, mass mobilization patterns, social media's role, and its impact on democratic institutions (Hadiz & Robison, 2017; Yilmaz & Barton, 2021; Ziv, 2001).

Historically, populism in Indonesia can be traced back to the colonial era, when anti-colonial movements used populist narratives to stir nationalist sentiments. In the post-independence era, Soekarno adopted a populist political style with anti-imperialism and national unity rhetorics as his primary political instruments to maintain popular support. The New Order era under Soeharto also showed more paternalistic characteristics of populism, where the state was portrayed as the protector of the people with economic policies that emphasized stability and development. After the 1998 reforms, populism underwent a significant transformation with the advent of democratization and political freedom, which opened up space for identity-based and economic populism to develop more widely.

From a theoretical perspective, populism in Indonesia has been clarified from several prominent approaches. In general, it is defined as an ideology representing the interests of

ordinary "people" against "elites" who are perceived as corrupt or careless of public welfare. A society is divided into two conflicting homogeneous groups: pure people and the corrupt elite (Freeden, 2017; Mudde, 2004). Populism is also described as a political phenomenon with contextual meanings. It can take multiple forms depending on the political, social, and cultural context (Caiani & Graziano, 2019). Apart from being an ideology, populism is also a political communication style (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). It is a political approach that uses simple, direct, and emotional rhetoric to mobilize popular support (Bonikowski & Gidron, 2016; Bracciale & Martella, 2017; Cassell, 2021; Gerstlé & Nai, 2019; Nai, 2021). Populism narratives are constructed through rhetoric that portrays populist leaders as direct representations of "the people" who are oppressed by political and economic elites (Guardino, 2018; Homolar & Löfflmann, 2021; Osuna, 2021; Roch, 2021; Urbinati, 2019). In the Indonesian context, populism intertwines with identity politics, specifically through issues of religion and ethnicity, which are reinforced by the role of social media in accelerating the spread of populist narratives (Rakhmani & Saraswati, 2021; Yilmaz & Barton, 2021).

Contemporary populism in Indonesia has developed in two foremost forms: religious-based populism and economic-based populism. Religious-based populism is seen in political movements such as the 212 Islamic Defense Action, where populist leaders use identity narratives to build mass mobilization (Ahyar & Alfitri, 2019). In Indonesia, populist leaders use identity issues, especially those related to religion, ethnicity, and social class, to gain political support (Aspinall et al., 2011; Hadiz, 2018b; Mietzner, 2020a). In the context of elections, populism becomes an effective tool to polarize society and strengthen the loyalty of a particular voter base (McCoy et al., 2018; McCoy & Somer, 2019; Meléndez & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2019; Roberts, 2022; Voogd & Dassonneville, 2020). Meanwhile, economic-based populism appears in the form of protectionist policies and the distribution of social assistance, which are often used to build political support among the lower middle class (Hadiz & Robison, 2012).

Populism in Indonesia occurs not only at the national level but also at the local level. Populist candidates capitalize on people's dissatisfaction with the government to win elections at the regional scale (Aspinall, 2005; Hamid, 2014; Mas'udi & Kurniawan, 2017). They always promise quick changes and economic improvements that directly touch people's daily lives. Populist policies, such as social assistance programs, primary food distribution, or large-scale infrastructure development, support their promises to voters (Bozkurt, 2013; Holland, 2017; Mamonova & Franquesa, 2020). However, these promises are challenging to realize, especially when the populist candidate faces a limited budget and low bureaucratic capacity to run his government.

One crucial element in the contemporary progress of populism in Indonesia is the role of social media (Rakhmani & Saraswati, 2021; Solahudin & Fakhruroji, 2020). Along with increasing internet access and social media use, populism has found new channels to spread its narrative. Populist actors employ platforms such as TikTok, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube to deliver their political messages quickly and directly to the public (Flew & Iosifidis, 2020; Gerbaudo, 2018; Hopster, 2021; Riddick, 2022). Social media allows them to interact with voters, spread disinformation, and build an image as leaders close to the people. It spreads hoaxes and provocative populist rhetoric, triggering social and political polarization (Carral et al., 2023; Engesser et al., 2017).

The emergence of social media as a marker of the progress of modern civilization has further strengthened the intensity of populism's application as a communication style of particular leaders to claim their self-image as true defenders of the people's interests. Social media allows populist leaders to deliver their messages directly to the public without going through traditional media intermediaries, considered part of the elite (Flew & Iosifidis, 2020; Hendrix, 2019; Mazzoleni & Bracciale, 2018). In other words, populism has found new channels to thrive through social media. It allows populist actors to construct their narratives more effectively and directly. According to Gerbaudo (2018), digital populism enables mass mobilization in a faster and broader way, where populist messages can spread quickly and influence public opinion. Social media has become the prominent arena for populist leaders to spread their narratives and mobilize

supporters through disinformation or manipulating public emotions. Social media is a communication tool and a platform where populist identities are built and reinforced through direct interaction between leaders and their followers.

The study of populism in Indonesia continues to evolve, reflecting its complexity and dynamics. Several researchers investigate populism within the framework of classical political theory, where it is also seen as a form of resistance to elitism and oligarchy (Aspinall, 2015; Hadiz & Robison, 2017; Robison & Hadiz, 2017). However, others define that populism in the country has distinctive features, especially as it is often intertwined with identity politics and religious issues (Ahyar & Alfitri, 2019; Amal, 2020; Azis et al., 2023; Mietzner, 2018b; Mietzner & Muhtadi, 2018; Susanto, 2019). In addition, studies of populism in the country also pay attention to how populism can undermine democratic institutions (Dressel & Bonoan, 2024; Mietzner, 2020b; Satrio, 2018; Siregar, 2024). Despite claiming to represent the people's will, populist leaders seek to undermine checks and balances, erode press freedom, and limit the space for political opposition (Kenny, 2020; Maatsch & Miklin, 2021; Weyland, 2022). Such an erosion of democratic institutions is often accompanied by the implementation of populist policies aimed at maintaining mass support, further illustrating the tension between populism and long-term governance. Populist leaders adopt populist policies, such as social assistance, welfare programs, or large infrastructure projects that promise immediate benefits to the public (Blake et al., 2024; Edwards, 2019; Kriesi, 2018). However, these populist policies are short-term and unsustainable, focusing more on gaining political support than long-term effectiveness. In other words, populist policies ignore deeper economic or social considerations and prioritize short-term political gains.

This article provides a narrative overview of prior studies on populism in Indonesia. Through a comprehensive literature approach, the author identifies historical context, core elements, and blind spots in previous studies, including the relationship between populism and identity politics, populism and electoral democracy, and the role of social media in spreading populist narratives. The article also discusses populism at the local level and how populist actors capitalize on people's dissatisfaction with democratic institutions to win political support. The study of populism is becoming increasingly relevant in contemporary political challenges. As populism continues to raise the political agenda, it is essential to understand its context, strategies, and impact. Previous research has contributed significantly to our comprehension of populism in Indonesia, but there is still much room for further exploration. By reviewing the existing literature, the article summarizes crucial findings from previous research and offers a more in-depth analysis of how populism affects politics in the country.

Compiling 107 relevant pieces of literature in the Scopus database, the author acquaints essential patterns that explain how populism emerges, develops, and is used in diverse political contexts in Indonesia. The phenomenon reflects domestic political dynamics and places within the broader context of global populism, where challenges to liberal democracy and formal political institutions are increasingly prominent. To better understand the role of populism in Indonesia's political landscape, the author presents a critical narrative of the various studies conducted while opening space for further discussion on how populism can shape the future of democracy.

The questions underlie the article's long elaboration are: (1) How has populism in Indonesia developed across historical, social, and digital landscapes? (2) What gaps remain in current research? These questions stem from the need to comprehend how populism, as a political phenomenon, has adapted to social, political, and technological changes in Indonesia from the colonial period to the current digital era. Through an analysis of previous literature, the author attempts to identify the prominent characteristics of populism in Indonesia, including its mobilization channels, goals, and influence on political and democratic dynamics. At the same time, the author also reveals areas that have not been widely researched, such as the dynamics of populism at the local level and the long-term impact of populism on economic policy, which are significant for enriching the understanding of populism in Indonesia and providing directions for future research.

Although prior studies on populism in Indonesia have addressed multiple aspects, such as the historical context and core elements of populism in the national political landscape, there is still a gap in understanding how populism has evolved in various government regimes as well as

how it interacts with social, economic and political digitalization factors. Previous researchers tend to focus more on populism as an electoral political phenomenon but less on exploring the dynamics of populism outside the electoral period, including how populist discourse survives or changes in the policies of the ongoing government. In addition, no studies have systematically identified blind spots in the study of populism in Indonesia, especially related to the influence of social media and the patterns of political communication used by populist actors in the digital era.

This article makes an academic contribution by filling a void in the Indonesian populism literature through a more comprehensive historical approach and critical analysis of the primary elements of populism. Highlighting under-discussed blind spots not only enriches the theoretical understanding of populism in Indonesia but also opens space for further research on the implications of populism for democratic institutions and civil society. Moreover, by considering the development of information technology and the role of social media in shaping populist narratives, the article offers a new perspective as a foundation for further research on the evolution of populism in Indonesia in a global context.

RESEARCH METHODS

This article is a qualitative narrative overview to explore the progress of populism studies in Indonesia. The approach was chosen to present a comprehensive overview of previous research findings based on an analysis of published literature. It allows the author to identify the historical context, core elements, and future research directions. The primary data source is secondary literature, which consists of journal articles, books, book chapters, and conference proceedings related to populism in Indonesia. The data was collected through a systematic search on the Scopus database. The search was conducted using keywords such as "populism in Indonesia" and "identity politics in Indonesia" to ensure the completeness and quality of the data. Studies published between 2001 and 2024 were the main focus to capture the dynamics of populism research in Indonesia (see Figure 1).

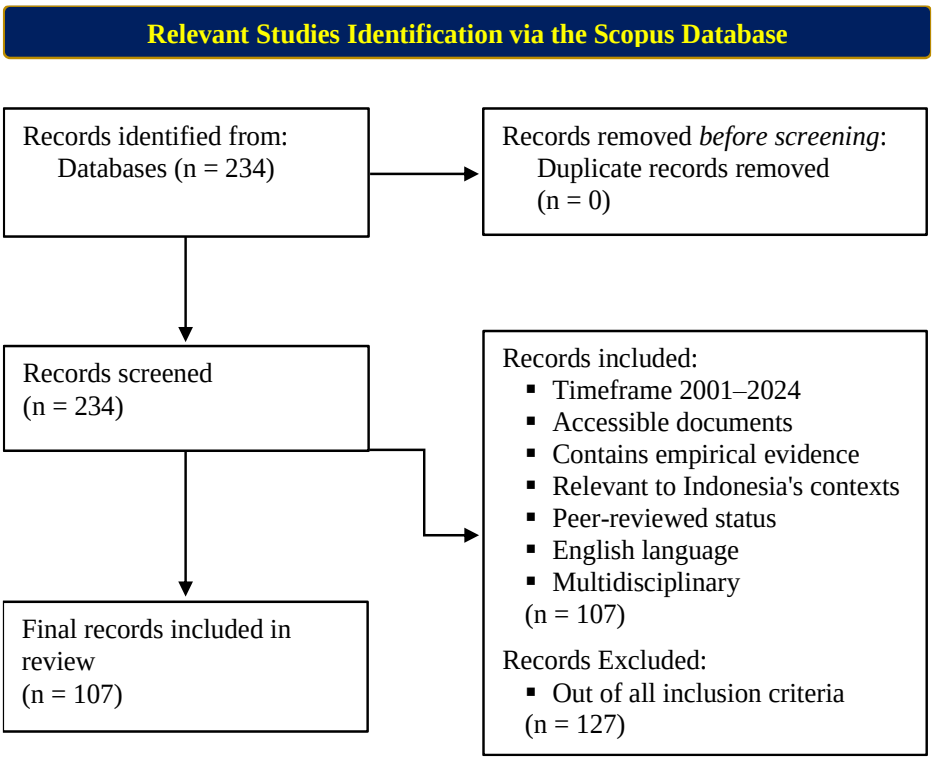

Figure 1.
The Process of Selecting Papers
Source: author's work

The author sets inclusion and exclusion criteria to guarantee the relevance of the analyzed literature. The inclusion criteria included literature within the 2001-2024 timeframe, accessible documents containing empirical evidence, peer-reviewed status, English language, multidisciplinary, and explicitly discussing populism in Indonesia. The exclusion criteria were applied to literature that only mentioned populism in passing without in-depth analysis or that only focused on other aspects without direct relevance to populism. Articles or studies that could not be accessed fully were excluded from the review.

After the data selection process, the next step was a thematic analysis of the 107 filtered pieces of literature. This analysis technique was used to identify the main patterns and themes that emerged from the collected literature (Malterud, 2012; Naeem et al., 2023). Data from various sources were carefully read, organized, and grouped into certain categories according to relevant topics, such as the definition of populism, populist strategies, the role of religion and ethnicity, and the influence of social media in populism in Indonesia. This thematic analysis aims to find similarities, differences, and emerging thematic trends in populism research to provide a comprehensive overview.

In narrative overview research, validity and reliability are maintained through a rigorous literature selection and systematic analysis. Using multiple data sources from different types of literature ensured data triangulation, resulting in richer and deeper research findings. In addition, the involvement of more than one researcher in the thematic analysis stage helped to reduce subjective bias and increase the reliability of the research results. An interpretative approach was then used to understand how the concept of populism in Indonesia evolves and changes in a constantly shifting social and political context. By analyzing various perspectives from the existing literature, the author describes the phenomenon of populism descriptively and provides critical interpretations of multiple relevant issues that arise. The approach is crucial in investigating the dynamics of populism research, especially in Indonesia, where that issue is often closely related to identity, religion, and social class domain.

While the narrative overview provides flexibility in analyzing multiple sources, it also has limitations, particularly concerning potential literature selection bias. Most of the literature surveyed comes from academic sources, which may not fully reflect the reality of populism at the grassroots level. In addition, the narrative overview is not as tightly structured as a quantitative measurement meta-analysis, so the study's results are more interpretative and exploratory.

This article reveals the historical context, core elements, and blind spots in prior studies of populism in Indonesia through the narrative overview. Such a thorough qualitative approach provides a deeper understanding of how populism is understood, developed, and applied in the Indonesian political and social context. The findings are expected to contribute to the academic literature and provide useful insights for other stakeholders in understanding and addressing the phenomenon of populism.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section focuses on an in-depth review of the historical context, core elements, and blind spots in previous research on populism in Indonesia. Historically, populism has been pivotal in Indonesian politics, from the colonial era to modern democratic reform. The seventh core element of Indonesian populism includes the *domain, antecedents, criticism targets*, *mobilization channels, goals, consequences,* and *counter-movements*. These elements have been key features in research on populist political dynamics in Indonesia. However, several blind spots need to be further explored, particularly concerning how populism develops at the local level, the role of social media in deepening polarization, and the impact of populist policies on the long-term economy.

The Historical Context of Populism in Indonesia

Populism in Indonesia has long and complex roots closely related to the nation's political, social, and economic history. The phenomenon, although often associated with modern political developments, originates in the colonial period, when populist narratives began to emerge as a

response to the dominance of colonial rule. Over time, populism developed with various faces and strategies, adjusting to Indonesia's political and social dynamics.

During the Dutch colonial era, resistance to colonial rule was framed in populist narratives. Local leaders who fought against the colonizers mobilized mass support through rhetoric emphasizing resistance to oppression and justice for the ordinary people. One clear example is Sarekat Islam's (SI) struggle in the early 20th century, which featured populist elements in its movement. The SI combined nationalist sentiments with Islamic teachings to fight colonial rule and emphasized welfare and social justice for the Indigenous people (Agustono et al., 2021; Faizi, 2023; Fukami, 1996; Kaptein, 2007).

National movement figures such as Soekarno also displayed populist features in their political rhetoric. He effectively utilized symbols of nationalism and national identity to mobilize the masses in the struggle for independence. His populist rhetoric spoke to the political elite class and the ordinary people, creating a bridge between leaders and the masses through simple yet powerful messages (Nair, 2023; Nartey & Ernanda, 2020). After Indonesia's independence, populism became one of the hallmarks of Soekarno's leadership in the Old Order era. As the first president, He used populist strategies to consolidate power (Kenny, 2021). He developed a narrative focused on national unity and resistance to imperialism and global capitalism (Bhardwaj, 2024). Through his passionate speeches, Soekarno managed to mobilize the people to support his vision of "*Nasakom*" (Nationalism, Religion, and Communism) as the ideological foundation of the state.

Soekarno's populism was also seen in his policies favoring small people, such as through economic programs that supported farmers and workers (Chong, 2008). On the other hand, the populism also caused fragmentation in Indonesian politics. Soekarno used anti-elite rhetoric to attack his political opponents, including the military and parties that were not in line with his ideology. As a result, Indonesian politics was highly polarized, with tensions between populist forces supporting Soekarno and elites who felt threatened by the populist movement.

When Soeharto rose to power in 1966 and started the New Order, populism remained an essential element in Indonesian politics, albeit in a very different style. Under the New Order, Soeharto's populism tended to be paternalistic, with him portrayed as the "Father of Development" responsible for the welfare of the people. Although populist rhetoric still existed, Soeharto focused on political stability and economic development rather than intense mass mobilization (Abbeloos, 2013; Vatikiotis, 1999).

Soeharto used populism to gain legitimacy, but not in the same way as Soekarno. Under his leadership, the government tried to maintain popular support through rural development programs and subsidies for essential goods (Hill, 2018; Keshav & Maharjan, 2017). However, behind the populist rhetoric, the New Order was a highly authoritarian regime that suppressed political opposition. While its paternalistic populist rhetoric persisted, tight controls on freedom of speech and a centralized political system weakened popular participation in political decision-making (Mietzner, 2018a).

After the fall of Soeharto in 1998, Indonesia entered the Reformation era, where populism re-emerged in multiple forms. The *Reformasi* opened the door to greater political freedom, allowing the emergence of various populist movements, especially among political elites who sought to gain support from the people. In this new democratic system, populism developed as a strategy to win votes in elections. One prominent example is the Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY) phenomenon in the early 2000s. Although SBY was not a populist in the extreme sense, his political campaign asserted "polite politics" and promised stability and prosperity to the ordinary people. SBY capitalized on people's dissatisfaction with economic conditions and corruption in the previous era and created an image as a leader who cared about the interests of the ordinary people (Honna, 2007; Mietzner, 2015). However, populism peaked during Joko Widodo's leadership. As a former furniture businessman and mayor of Solo, Jokowi built an image of himself as an "ordinary man" close to the people. His populist leadership style and policies focusing on infrastructure and public services successfully positioned him as a populist leader in a modern context. Jokowi uses anti-elite narratives in his speeches, emphasizing the significance of

"*blusukan*" or going directly to the people as a form of populist approach (Cahyono et al., 2024; Noor, 2023).

In the contemporary era, populism is also heavily influenced by the development of technology and social media. The internet, especially platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and TikTok has allowed populists to communicate directly with the public without using traditional media. In elections, social media is used to spread populist messages that target the emotions and sentiments of the masses, be it through content that raises economic, religious, or identity issues. Populist figures use it to mobilize support, build anti-elite narratives, and strengthen their position in the eyes of the public. In this context, populism in Indonesia is undergoing a significant transformation, with populist leaders utilizing traditional strategies and leveraging digital technology to expand their reach and influence.

The 212 Movement phenomenon exemplifies how identity politics can be mobilized through social media to create political pressure on the government. The movement, which started as a protest against Ahok's alleged blasphemy, evolved into a broader political movement using the narrative that secular political elites are marginalizing Muslims in Indonesia. Through WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter, the movement managed to organize mass actions on a large scale, demonstrating that social media can serve as an effective tool to mobilize groups with common political interests. Within this movement, several populist figures emerged as prime movers, using rhetoric that suggested they were direct representations of the people's will. Through social media, they construct a narrative that their resistance is not just against specific individuals, but against political structures that are perceived to oppress Muslims. By continuing to disseminate the claim that religion is under threat, they succeeded in strengthening group solidarity and deepening the divide between communities with different political views (Ahyar & Alfitri, 2019; Nuryanti, 2021; Suryana, 2023).

Another significant example of the transformation of digital populism in Indonesia was the 2019 election when social media was massively used for political campaigns based on propaganda, disinformation and personal attacks on opposing candidates. Both the Jokowi and Prabowo Subianto camps relied on intensive digital strategies, using buzzers, bots and influencers to steer public opinion. These strategies aimed to boost their candidate's image and discredit the opponent in often manipulative ways. Various controversial issues such as allegations of foreign involvement, political conspiracies, and media fabrications are used to build perceptions in the public that one candidate is more nationalistic, more religious, or more pro-people than the other. In this context, disinformation became the primary weapon. For example, during the campaign period, many videos, memes and articles were widely disseminated through Facebook and WhatsApp, containing allegations that Jokowi was a “foreign stooge” or had affiliations with communist groups. Prabowo, on the other hand, was also the target of negative campaigns that portrayed him as an authoritarian leader with militaristic ambitions. This kind of content is often created deliberately to trigger public emotions and create feelings of distrust towards the opposing candidate. In an increasingly fragmented social media ecosystem, individuals are more likely to believe information that suits their political preferences, without verifying the truth through credible sources (Husin & Al Akbar, 2019; Kayane, 2020).

In summary, the historical context of populism confirms that the phenomenon has existed since the colonial period, developed throughout the nation's history, and experienced various forms and manifestations in each era. From the struggle against colonialism and Soekarno's charismatic leadership to the era of digital democracy under Jokowi, populism has been an integral part of Indonesia's political dynamics. Its fluid and flexible nature allows populism to adapt to social, economic, and technological changes, making it one of the most relevant elements in modern Indonesian politics.

Core Elements of Indonesian Populism Studies

In scientific studies of populism in Indonesia, prior researchers dissect the phenomenon through seven core elements that shape its dynamics and impacts in the political and social context (see Figure 2). These elements include the *domain* as the main arena for the development of the movement, *antecedents* that identify the causal factors that trigger its emergence, and the

criticism targets of the populist narrative. The *mobilization channels* used to disseminate messages and rally support become the additional focus of attention, along with the *goals* that populist actors want to achieve. The *consequences* of populism, both in the short and long term, and *counter-movements* that emerge in response to populism are also essential aspects of the analysis.

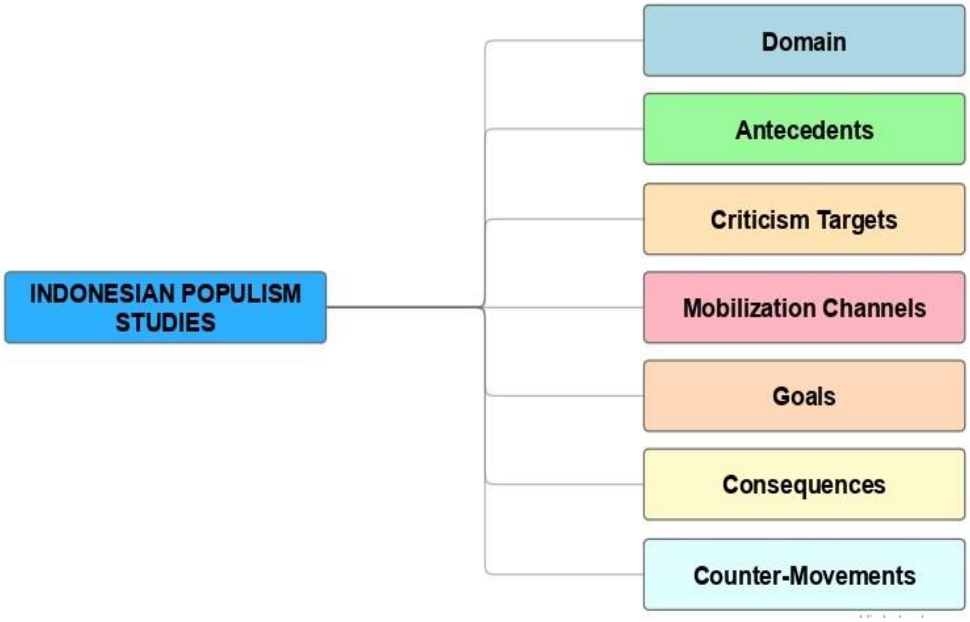

Figure 2.
Core Elements of Indonesian Populism Studies
Source: author's work

Domain

Indonesian populism is usually analyzed in two prominent domains: "populism as a social movement" and "populism as a style of political leadership." This phenomenon emerges as a response to widespread socio-political dissatisfaction, especially among people who feel marginalized by government policies or economic systems that are considered unfair. The movement is also controlled by populist political leaders who use rhetoric to consolidate power by claiming to be legitimate representatives of the people. Thus, populism in the country includes diverse social movements rooted in widespread dissatisfaction and leader figures who use populist strategies to strengthen their support.

Populism as a social movement emerged from various social groups who felt neglected by the existing political system. This dissatisfaction is rooted in social, economic, and political injustice (Barton et al., 2021; Diprose et al., 2019; Hadiz, 2014, 2021; Hadiz & Robison, 2017; Mietzner, 2020b). One prime example is the 212 Movement (*Aksi Bela Islam*), which emerged as a reaction to the alleged blasphemy committed by the Governor of DKI Jakarta, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok). The movement highlighted dissatisfaction among conservative Muslim groups with government policies that were considered disrespectful to their religious identity (Ahyar & Alfitri, 2019; Suryana, 2023). It mobilized many people and demonstrated how populism can express identity-based dissatisfaction.

In addition, the 1998 *Reformasi* Movement is also a prominent instance of populism as a social movement. This movement succeeded in overthrowing the New Order regime led by Seoharto after more than three decades in power. A devastating economic crisis, widespread corruption, and long-standing political oppression triggered the movement (Aspinall, 2019; Fukuoka, 2014; Lee, 2018). Populism emerged as a tool for people to demand changes to a more democratic political system, free from the control of oligarchies and old political elites. Other populist social movements include labor and peasant movements, which demand economic justice and better rights (Törnquist, 2022; White et al., 2023). Mass mobilizations from these

groups use populist rhetoric to demand better wages, land access, and fairer policies. These movements illustrate how populism can function as a tool to voice dissatisfaction with socio-economic structures that are considered unfair.

On the other hand, populism in Indonesia is also seen in the style of political leadership, where populist leaders use rhetoric that emphasizes themselves as direct representatives of the people. In contrast, other political elites are labeled corrupt or indifferent to ordinary people (Hatherell & Welsh, 2020; Mudhoffir, 2020; Ufen, 2024; Widian et al., 2023). Populist leaders, such as Joko Widodo (Jokowi), are very effective in building their self-image as "*wong cilik*" or "ordinary people" who are close to the people's daily lives (Hamid, 2014; Noor, 2023). Jokowi, in his political campaigns, confirms his simplicity and commitment to eradicating corruption and prioritizing the interests of the ordinary people. In the context of populism, Jokowi is described as a leader who understands the people's problems better than traditional politicians.

Other populist leaders, such as Prabowo Subianto, use populist strategies to gain support. Prabowo, who has often run for president, raises muscular nationalist issues and criticizes political elites who consider pro-foreign and pro-globalization. In his rhetoric, Prabowo claims to be a national sovereignty defender who fights against injustice caused by global capitalism. He also noted the need for economic independence and protection for domestic industries as part of his populist agenda (Aspinall, 2015; Ufen, 2024). Anies Baswedan, the former governor of Jakarta, is also considered one of the populist leaders who successfully used religious and nationalist narratives to attract voters. Anies speaks about equality and social justice while approaching conservative Islamic groups who feel their identity is threatened by the previous government's policies (Lestanata, 2023; Sujoko et al., 2022). Anies' populist strategy includes mobilizing religious sentiment as a political tool, especially during the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election.

There is a close relationship between populist social movements and populist leadership in Indonesia. Social movements that emerge from widespread dissatisfaction are taken over or utilized by populist leaders to strengthen their political support. Populist leaders exploit widespread dissatisfaction with the elite and frame themselves as the only legitimate representation of the people's will. For example, the 212 Movement, initially a mass action based on religion, was later used by politicians such as Anies Baswedan and Prabowo Subianto to gain voter sympathy in political contests. This mobilization reflects a typical pattern in which populist social movements provide a platform for political leaders to consolidate their power through rhetoric emphasizing the conflict between the "people" and the "elite." At the same time, populist leadership in Indonesia also uses social movements to legitimize their actions in the eyes of the public. In many cases, populist leaders use the masses to strengthen their claims that they truly represent the people's will. However, after gaining power, many engage in actions that contradict their populist promises, such as strengthening personal power and weakening democratic institutions.

Overall, populism in Indonesia operates in two interrelated domains: a social movement mobilized by widespread dissatisfaction and a political leadership style used by populist leaders to consolidate power. Populist social movements such as the 212 Movement and the 1998 *Reformasi* Movement demonstrate how populism can serve as a tool for popular mobilization to demand social and political change. On the other hand, populist leaders such as Joko Widodo, Prabowo Subianto, and Anies Baswedan demonstrate how populism can be used as a political strategy to gain popular support, often with rhetoric that polarizes the people and the elite. The interaction between social movements and populist leadership reflects a broader pattern in global populism, where mass mobilization is used to support populist leaders who take over the movement to strengthen their positions. The challenge facing populism in Indonesia is managing this relationship without undermining democratic principles, such as pluralism, accountability, and respect for minority rights.

Antecedents

Several factors have become the primary drivers of the emergence of populist movements. Prior studies reveal that populism in Indonesia, as in other countries, is rooted in

social and economic dissatisfaction, political legitimacy crises, globalization's impact, and increasing economic inequality.

First, populism arises from widespread frustration among the people, especially related to economic injustice and social inequality (Hadiz & Robison, 2017; Hadiz & Teik, 2011; Robison & Hadiz, 2017; van Klinken, 2018). In Indonesia, economic problems such as unemployment, rising prices of necessities, and inequality between cities and villages have triggered dissatisfaction among the people. This frustration is not only felt by the lower class but also by the middle class, who are marginalized due to economic policies that benefit the elite. Inequality in the distribution of wealth, access to public services, and economic opportunities fuels populist movements, which focus on the rhetoric of "defending the common people" against "corrupt elites." This inequality is also exacerbated by government policies that fail to address the economic needs of the poor and marginalized. In this context, populism offers simple and direct solutions, such as promises of economic redistribution or subsidies for people experiencing poverty, accompanied by sharp criticism of elites and governments that are considered indifferent.

Second, a crisis of political legitimacy occurs when people lose trust in existing political institutions, political parties, and elites (Aspinall & Mietzner, 2014; Hadiz, 2018a; Priego, 2018). Since the 1998 Reformation era, many political parties have been involved in corruption scandals, failed to fulfill campaign promises, and appeared to prioritize power over the welfare of the people. This distrust of political parties and democratic institutions creates a gap for populist leaders to gain support by claiming to be an alternative closer to the people. This legitimacy crisis also involves dissatisfaction with the government's performance, both at the national and local levels, where leaders are considered to have failed to meet people's social and economic justice expectations. Populist leaders such as Jokowi or Prabowo Subianto have exploited this dissatisfaction by stating that they are not part of the old political elite and promising to "cleanse" politics from corruption and personal interests. The distrust of institutions is also exacerbated by the inability of the formal democratic system to produce policies that are responsive to the needs of the people. Populist leaders accuse democratic institutions of being controlled by self-interested oligarchs so that only they can defend the people's interests.

Third, globalization has significantly changed Indonesia's social and economic structure. Increased international trade, foreign investment, and labor migration have transformed the financial landscape, but not all groups in society have benefited equally from these changes. Globalization has led to the loss of traditional jobs, economic uncertainty, and increased social insecurity. These significant changes by globalization trigger the birth of populist movements, especially among those who feel left behind by the currents of modernization and globalization. In Indonesia, the impact of globalization can be seen in dissatisfaction with foreign industries that are considered to be damaging the local economy or destroying natural resources. Populists exploit these issues related to globalization by blaming the government and elites who are considered too pro-foreign and pro-globalization. They position themselves as defenders of the people from the negative impacts of globalization while promising to protect domestic industries and ensure that the economic benefits of globalization are not enjoyed only by a handful of elites (Bourchier & Jusuf, 2023; Hadiz & Robison, 2012; Yasih & Hadiz, 2023).

Fourth, the ever-widening economic gap between the wealthy elite and the majority of the people creates fertile ground for populism. In Indonesia, despite rapid economic growth over the past few decades, the distribution of wealth remains highly unequal. Wealth is concentrated in a handful of oligarchs' hands, while most people live in economically vulnerable conditions. This inequality provides populists with an opportunity to capitalize on this dissatisfaction (Aspinall, 2013; Hadiz, 2014, 2018b; Sustikarini & Kabinawa, 2018). Populist leaders use the rhetoric of economic redistribution, promising to correct this inequality through pro-people policies, such as subsidies, social assistance, or the elimination of policies considered only to benefit the elite. In addition, social injustices felt by minority or marginalized groups, such as farmers, laborers, and residents in remote areas, are also vital issues used by populists. They

portray the elite as responsible for this injustice, emphasizing that they live in luxury while the people suffer.

In summary, populist movements are rooted in deep dissatisfaction with social, economic, and political injustices. This dissatisfaction is fueled by a crisis of political legitimacy, injustices caused by globalization, and widening economic disparities. Populists use rhetoric that targets elites and institutions that are considered corrupt, unresponsive, and pro-foreign while promising rapid and immediate change to address the problems faced by the people. Thus, populism in Indonesia reflects a typical pattern in many other countries, where populism emerges as a response to deep economic, social, and political crises.

Criticism Targets

In the context of populism in Indonesia, the primary criticism is directed at various institutions that are considered not to represent the interests of the people and are more inclined to serve the interests of the elite. Populism in Indonesia uses this criticism to mobilize support and highlight itself as a representative of the "true people."

Political elites are the main target of populist criticism, as they are considered the primary source of injustice and corruption in the political system. Populist leaders portray political elites as corrupt, selfish, and careless of the needs of the people (Aspinall, 2015; Gammon, 2020; Gunn, 2014). This narrative refers to the understanding that political elites only pursue their personal or group interests under the control of economic oligarchies or specific interest groups. In populist rhetoric, political elites are labeled as traitors to the people who fail to uphold social and economic justice. Populist leaders such as Prabowo Subianto use this narrative in their campaigns, emphasizing that the current political system is controlled by elites who only care about themselves and ignore the nation’s interests. Jokowi, although he once claimed to be an outsider or ordinary person at the beginning of his political career, uses the same narrative to present himself as a figure who fights against the political elite’s corruption. This anti-elite narrative is a hallmark of populism, where political elites are portrayed as the common enemy of the people. This criticism becomes sharper when major corruption cases are revealed, further strengthening the narrative that political elites cannot be trusted and only use their power to enrich themselves.

Populism in Indonesia also targets the bureaucracy as a target of criticism by depicting it as an institution that is slow, ineffective, and insensitive to the community's needs. The bureaucracy, often described as full of corruption, inefficiency, and nepotism, has become a symbol of the state’s failure to provide adequate public services. The bureaucracy is considered too rigid and fixated on administrative rules that do not serve the interests of the people but rather strengthen the position of the bureaucratic elite itself (Teik, 2014). Populist leaders use criticism of the bureaucracy to position themselves as agents of change who will "cleanse" the government system of corrupt practices and inefficiency. This criticism narrative is highly relevant in the context of decentralization in Indonesia, where local bureaucracies fail to meet the community's expectations, especially in remote areas. Populist regional leaders use this issue to gain support with promises of bureaucratic reform and accelerated public services.

International institutions such as the IMF, WTO, and other multilateral organizations are also the target of populist criticism in Indonesia, especially when policies pushed by these institutions are considered detrimental to national interests. Populists argue that these institutions interfere in domestic affairs and support policies that benefit international elites and harm local people (Hill et al., 2020; Schirm, 2019). Criticism of globalization arises in an economic context, where economic liberalization and free trade policies are considered detrimental to local workers and traditional industrial sectors. Populists allege that globalization has led to job losses, financial uncertainty, and greater inequality between the rich and the poor. Prabowo Subianto, in several of his political campaigns, attacks foreign influence and economic policies that are considered too pro-foreign. He often highlights how Indonesia is too dependent on foreign capital and international institutions, which ultimately leads to a loss of economic independence (Aspinall, 2015; Ufen, 2024). This criticism was strengthened during the 1997-1998 monetary crisis when the IMF was seen as a symbol of foreign intervention that was detrimental to

Indonesia. In this context, populism exploits widespread dissatisfaction with the adverse effects of globalization, especially in terms of the economy and national sovereignty.

Populist movements consider mainstream media as part of the elite that does not represent the people's interests (Akkerman, 2011; Fawzi, 2019). Mainstream media, especially those owned by large conglomerates, are considered biased towards the political elite or oligarchy that controls the Indonesian economy. Populists use this narrative to discredit media reports that are critical of them, calling the media a "tool of the elite" that is not objective. Mainstream media is also criticized for being more about voicing the interests of the elite than giving space to the aspirations of ordinary people. For example, in political campaigns, populist candidates claim that the mainstream media does not provide fair coverage or is biased toward elite candidates. This criticism is an integral part of the populist strategy to gain support from their voters, who feel their voices are not heard by the media. In addition, using social media as an alternative to mainstream media has become an essential tool for populist leaders in Indonesia. Leaders such as Jokowi and Prabowo Subianto extensively use social media to communicate directly with their voters, bypassing traditional information distribution channels dominated by the mainstream media. In this way, they can convey their populist message without intervention or distortion from media that are considered biased.

In conclusion, populism in Indonesia uses sharp rhetoric to attack political elites, bureaucracy, international institutions, and mainstream media. Political elites are seen as the main enemy who are corrupt and do not care about the people's interests. Bureaucracy, on the other hand, is considered slow and unresponsive to the needs of the people. International institutions and globalization are seen as detrimental to national sovereignty and the economy, while mainstream media are considered biased and do not voice the people's interests. Populist leaders in Indonesia use these criticisms to mobilize support and assert their position as defenders of the people against "enemies" who are considered to be damaging the nation's social and economic order.

Mobilizations Channels

Populism in Indonesia uses various mobilization channels to attract widespread support and express dissatisfaction with political and economic elites. These channels include the use of emotional rhetoric that simplifies complex issues, the use of social media as a primary means of communication and mobilization, the holding of mass protests and demonstrations to demonstrate the power of the people, and the role of charismatic populist leaders who build direct relationships with their supporters. Here is a more detailed explanation of each of these channels of mobilization in the Indonesian context:

First, populism uses emotional rhetoric and simplifies complex issues to make the masses easily understand their messages. This emotional rhetoric usually involves using simple language easily digested by the general public (Annisa et al., 2023; Dewi, 2020; Hatherell & Welsh, 2021; Widian et al., 2023). Rather than offering in-depth or evidence-based solutions, populists present problems in black-and-white terms, where political or economic elites are portrayed as enemies of the people and themselves as heroes who will defend the interests of the ordinary people. Jokowi, when he first ran for president, used rhetoric that focused on simplicity, closeness to the people, and resistance to corruption. The populist rhetoric simplifies complex issues, such as the economy and public policy, into messages emphasizing the need for reform and eradicating corrupt elites. Nevertheless, this emotional rhetoric provides quick solutions, such as promises to "cleanse" the bureaucracy from corruption, which, although complex in implementation, are still delivered in a form that is easy for the public to understand. This approach efficiently evokes emotional responses from voters disappointed with the status quo because populists successfully mobilize widespread dissatisfaction by presenting problems simply and offering solutions that seem easy to achieve.

Second, in Indonesia, social media has become one of the main mobilization channels for populist movements. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram allow populist messages to spread quickly and widely, creating direct interaction between populist leaders and

the people. Social media enable populist leaders to bypass the mainstream media, which is often considered biased, and communicate directly with their supporters (Ahmad, 2022a, 2024; Annisa et al., 2023; Boellstorff, 2020; Santoso et al., 2020; Siregar, 2024; Solahudin & Fakhruroji, 2020). Jokowi and Prabowo Subianto, two populist figures, actively use social media in their campaigns to attract support. Social media also allows populist leaders to leverage viral content, memes, and short videos that simplify complex issues into emotional messages readily accepted by the public. Social media allows for faster and more effective mobilization, especially among the younger generation, which is more active in using these platforms. In addition, social media allows for direct participation from the community, where they can provide support, share content, or even organize political activities online, followed by real action on the ground.

Third, mass protests and demonstrations are one form of physical mobilization used by populist movements to demonstrate their strength and legitimacy. These demonstrations are associated with criticism of political elites or government policies that are considered unfair. These protests also serve to assert that populists are the voice of the "true people" who are fighting against injustice created by the elite (Ahyar & Alfitri, 2019; Aidulsyah & Mizuno, 2020; Amal, 2020; Gibbings et al., 2017; Hadiz, 2018a; Mietzner & Muhtadi, 2018; Porter, 2002; Shohei, 2021; Suryana, 2023; Yilmaz & Barton, 2021). A prominent example of this mobilization is the "212 Movement" in 2016, which organized a massive demonstration to demand punishment for Ahok, who was considered to have blasphemed Islam. The protests involved hundreds of thousands of people and demonstrated the power of Islamic populism In Indonesia. The movement succeeded in building narratives that represented the voice of Muslims against political elites who were considered indifferent to religious sensitivities. These mass protests are used by populist movements to increase political pressure on the government and strengthen public support while creating an image that populists have broad and legitimate popular support.

Fourth, charismatic leadership is a critical element in populist mobilization. Populist leaders have a solid and charismatic persona, which allows them to attract the masses and build strong emotional connections with their supporters (Gammon, 2023; Hatherell & Welsh, 2020; Heydarian, 2020; Kenny, 2021; Kustiawan et al., 2023; Noor, 2023; Oztas, 2020; Pernia, 2023; Ziv, 2001). Populist leaders such as Jokowi and Prabowo Subianto use their charisma to create direct ties with their constituents. Populist leaders tend to position themselves as "ordinary people" who understand the people's problems better than elite politicians. They emphasize their simplicity and closeness to the daily lives of ordinary people and use their image as part of the populist narrative. Jokowi, for example, is portrayed as a humble leader who is close to the people, walks in the middle of the market, and listens directly to the people's complaints. These charismatic leaders use cultural and nationalistic symbols to strengthen their support, such as positioning themselves as defenders of state sovereignty or protectors of national identity. Prabowo Subianto, in several of his political campaigns, uses military and nationalist symbols to attract support from those who believe in the need for strong and decisive leaders. Charismatic leadership is crucial in attracting and sustaining populist support, especially in countries like Indonesia, where the leader figure is the ultimate symbol of a political movement.

Overall, the mobilization channels in populism reflect the complex and diverse dynamics in the relationship between populist leaders and the people. Emotional rhetoric and simplification allow populists to convey their messages in a way that is easily understood by the wider public. Social media provides a fast and direct communication channel to mobilize the masses. Mass protests and demonstrations demonstrate the legitimacy of populist movements and pressure political elites. At the same time, charismatic leadership allows populist leaders to attract support through a strong emotional connection with their supporters. All of these channels work together to form a solid base of support for populist movements in Indonesia, which are rooted in the people's social, economic, and political dissatisfaction with elites who are perceived as corrupt and uncaring.

Goals

Populist goals usually focus on four primary things: gaining mass support, shaking up the status quo, gaining power, and dominating public discourse. Populism in Indonesia utilizes emotional rhetoric, social media, and leaders' charisma to achieve these goals.

One of the main goals of populism is to garner broad support from the general public. To achieve this, populists use simple, emotional, and appealing rhetoric that various levels of society can easily understand. This rhetoric usually involves simplifying complex political issues into a narrative of "the people versus the elite," where populists position themselves as defenders of the ordinary people (Gibbings et al., 2017; Shohei, 2021). In Indonesia, leaders like Jokowi have succeeded in garnering mass support with a simple and close-to-the-people image. His political campaign highlights themes that resonate with people's daily lives, such as eradicating corruption, economic prosperity, and infrastructure development. This approach allows populists to build a solid emotional connection with their supporters, creating a sense that populist leaders genuinely represent the people's aspirations. In addition to Jokowi, Prabowo Subianto also managed to attract mass support through nationalist rhetoric emphasizing the need to protect Indonesia's sovereignty from foreign intervention and globalization. This populist narrative seeks to portray Indonesia as a victim of international injustice, which a strong and sovereign leader must protect.

Populism in Indonesia strives to shake up the existing political order, which is considered corrupt, unfair, and unresponsive to the needs of the people. Populists seek to overthrow the status quo controlled by political and economic elites, which hinders the changes desired by the people. In this context, populists claim to be an alternative to the established system and offer new solutions that are considered fairer and pro-people (Mietzner, 2018b). One prime example of populism that shook up the status quo was the "1998 Reform Movement", which succeeded in overthrowing the New Order regime under President Soeharto. This movement involved large-scale mass mobilization to demand political reform, democracy, and the elimination of deep-rooted corruption in government. In this situation, populists act as agents of change who seek to destroy the old system that is considered to have failed to provide welfare and justice for the people. In the post-*Reformasi* era, leaders such as Prabowo Subianto have also sought to shake up the status quo with harsh criticism of political and economic elites who have betrayed the people's interests. In his various political campaigns, Prabowo defined the need for radical changes in the political system to restore people's sovereignty and improve economic conditions.

Another fundamental goal of populism in Indonesia, as in many other countries, is to control political institutions and the decision-making process. Populists seek to gain power through direct support from the people by exploiting public dissatisfaction with the government or the ruling political elite (Hadiz, 2016; Pernia, 2023; Tomsa, 2009; Törnquist, 2019). Populists such as Jokowi and Prabowo use mass support as political capital to achieve positions of power at the local and national levels. Once populists gain power, they use the popularity and legitimacy they gain from the people to control political institutions and influence policies under their populist agenda. Jokowi, for example, uses the mandate of the people to push for a massive infrastructure development agenda, which is considered an effort to improve the welfare of ordinary people. On the other hand, Prabowo has also run for president several times using a populist narrative, although he has not yet won the election. However, its main goal remains clear: to use populist support to gain political power and implement its populist agenda.

One crucial tactic in populism is to dominate public discourse by highlighting divisive issues and using the media to amplify populist messages. Populists try to control the political narrative by raising issues touching people's sensitivities, such as nationalism, religion, economic injustice, and national sovereignty. Social media has become an essential tool for populists to dominate public discourse (Husin & Al Akbar, 2019; Muksinin & Aminah, 2021; Piliang et al., 2023; Santoso et al., 2020; Yilmaz et al., 2022). Using platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, populists can spread their messages quickly and widely and influence public opinion. Social media allows populists to bypass mainstream media that may be biased towards the elite so that populists can communicate directly with the people without intermediaries.

A significant example is the "212 Movement", where populists successfully used religious issues to dominate political discourse and build a narrative that they represent the “voice of Muslims” against political elites who are considered insensitive to spiritual interests. This movement shows how populists use divisive issues like religion and identity to consolidate support and control political discourse. In addition, populists use the media to build an image as defenders of the ordinary people fighting against the elite. Populist leaders use emotional rhetoric and strong media images to attract public sympathy and ensure that populist messages remain dominant in public discourse.

In summary, populism in Indonesia has several prominent goals, including gaining mass support, shaking up the status quo, gaining power, and dominating public discourse. Populist leaders use different mobilization channels, such as emotional rhetoric, social media, and mass protests, to achieve these goals. By gaining broad support from the people, populists seek to overthrow the existing political order and control political institutions through popular mandates. In addition, populists also seek to dominate public discourse by highlighting issues that touch on people’s sensitivities and using the media to amplify their populist messages. These goals of populism reflect the complex dynamics of Indonesian politics, where populists exploit dissatisfaction with the elite and the existing political system to build political power and change the national political landscape.

Consequences

In the Indonesian context, populism has a significant positive and negative impact on political, social, and policy dynamics. Populism is a mobilization tool to strengthen popular support and overcome dissatisfaction with political elites (Robison & Hadiz, 2020; Shukri & Smajljaj, 2020). However, it has several negative consequences that can weaken democracy, exacerbate social polarization, and encourage unsustainable short-term policies.

First, populism in Indonesia causes political polarization that divides society into two large groups: “the people” versus “the elite” or “the majority” versus “the minority.” Populists usually use rhetoric that reinforces social and political differences, depicting the elite as the enemy of the people and positioning themselves as defenders of the “true people” (Adiwilaga et al., 2019; Azis et al., 2023; Kayane, 2020; Törnquist et al., 2022; Yilmaz & Morieson, 2021). This political polarization was evident in Indonesia during the presidential elections, especially in 2014 and 2019, which brought together Jokowi and Prabowo Subianto. The populist campaigns of both parties exacerbated social divisions, with supporters of each candidate attacking each other with the narrative of “the people against the elite” or “Islam versus secular.” This polarization occurs among political elites and reaches the general public, causing tensions between supporters of both camps. Populism amplifies social tensions, primarily when populists use issues of religion, ethnicity, or other identities as political tools. This polarization can widen the gap between social groups, damage social cohesion, and make political reconciliation more difficult.

Second, another profound negative impact of populism is the decline of democracy. In some cases, populism in Indonesia has eroded democratic institutions by attacking independent institutions such as the courts, the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK), and freedom of the press. Populists accuse these institutions of being part of corrupt or undemocratic elites and seek to weaken them for their political interests (Fossati & Mietzner, 2019; Satrio, 2018; Susanto, 2019; Warburton & Aspinall, 2019). For example, when the government attacked the KPK under President Jokowi, many saw it as weakening democratic institutions. Although Jokowi was initially elected with anti-corruption rhetoric, populism in his leadership ultimately led to the ratification of the revised KPK Law, which many considered to weaken the institution's function. In cases of extreme populism, populist leaders can restrict press freedom, control democratic institutions, and undermine the checks and balances that are supposed to maintain the balance of power. When independent democratic institutions are attacked, the risk of democratic backsliding becomes very real, especially in young democracies like Indonesia.

Third, policies resulting from populist movements are often short-term and aimed at winning mass support without considering the long-term impacts. Populists usually prioritize

policies that are popular with the public, such as subsidies, direct cash assistance, or protectionist policies intended to protect domestic industries, but these policies are not accompanied by careful calculation of their economic consequences (Marks, 2009; Maulana, 2023; Muksinin & Aminah, 2021; Purnomo et al., 2022; Törnquist et al., 2022; Winanti & Hanif, 2020). In Indonesia, one example is the fuel subsidy policy that the government uses to quell public protests against rising fuel prices. Although this policy is very popular with the public, fuel subsidies have been proven to burden the state budget and divert funds that could be used for infrastructure development or other social programs. These populist policies, although they can provide short-term satisfaction, are unsustainable and can harm economic and social stability in the long term. Populists tend to prioritize policies that will boost their political popularity over policies that bring long-term benefits to the country.

Fourth, populism in Indonesia is accompanied by a rise in nationalism and protectionism, reinforcing anti-globalization and anti-foreign sentiment (Latif, 2019; Nolte, 2023; Ridwan & Robikah, 2019). Populist leaders such as Prabowo Subianto use nationalist rhetoric to reject foreign interference in domestic economic and political affairs and support protectionist policies focusing on national economic development. This nationalism, while it can increase national pride, can also be problematic when accompanied by xenophobia or excessive anti-foreign attitudes. Protectionist policies that focus on protecting domestic industries ignore the benefits of international cooperation and global trade. In the long run, this can isolate Indonesia from the international community and harm the country's economy. Excessive nationalism can also fuel international tensions and hinder the development of economies that depend on international trade. While nationalist populist policies may be popular domestically, they can impair Indonesia's engagement in the global economy and isolate the country from the benefits of broader economic integration.

Fifth, populism in Indonesia can also lead to authoritarianism, where populist leaders who come to power use the people's mandate to consolidate personal power and undermine democracy. Authoritarian populism is seen when populist leaders reject democratic mechanisms such as freedom of the press, fair elections, and the independence of state institutions and prefer to control these institutions for their personal or party interests. Authoritarian populism can develop when populist leaders use popular support to strengthen their power and undermine the basic principles of democracy. Populist leaders in Indonesia use the mandate they receive through elections to weaken civil liberties and democratic institutions, creating an authoritarian regime that is increasingly difficult to overthrow (Ahmad, 2022b; Demirci, 2023; Dressel & Bonoan, 2024; Edelman, 2020; Rakhmani & Saraswati, 2021; Yilmaz et al., 2023).

Sixth, populism in Indonesia can also encourage religious-based violence, vigilantism, extremism, and radicalism. Populists who use religious rhetoric to gain support strengthen sectarian sentiments that can trigger violence (Barton et al., 2021; Jaffrey, 2021; Jati, 2013; Suryana, 2023). A prime example is the 212 Movement, which was mobilized using religious issues to oppose the then Governor of DKI Jakarta, Ahok. This movement shows how religious-based populism can trigger violence and social division. Populism rooted in religious rhetoric can trigger vigilantism and sectarian violence, where extremist groups take it upon themselves to "enforce justice" based on their interpretation of religion. It can exacerbate radicalism and disrupt social stability, especially in a pluralistic, multicultural society like Indonesia (Afrimadona, 2021).

Overall, populism has complex impacts, both positive and negative. On the one hand, populism can provide a platform for people to express dissatisfaction with corrupt and unresponsive elites. However, it can also exacerbate political polarization, weaken democracy, encourage short-term policies, and isolate the country through excessive nationalism. In addition, authoritarian populism and religious-based violence also pose severe threats to political and social stability. By understanding these consequences, we can be more careful in analyzing and responding to the phenomenon of populism in Indonesia.

Counter-Movements

Counter-movements against populism in Indonesia have emerged in various forms, aimed at opposing and balancing the negative impacts of populism, especially those potentially damaging social order, democracy, and civil liberties. These movements include responses from intellectual groups and civil society organizations that care about democratic values and human rights. These counter-movements highlight the importance of maintaining the principles of democracy, pluralism, and tolerance amidst the challenges of populism that rely on emotional and divisive rhetoric.

First, academics and intellectuals play an essential role in counter-movements against populism. They offer a critical analysis of populism and reveal its adverse impacts on democracy and society (Anoraga & Sakai, 2023; Herkman, 2022). Many researchers, lecturers, and scholars provide alternative views through scientific articles, opinion columns, seminars, and public discussions, seeking to balance the narrative dominated by populist rhetoric. Intellectuals such as Edward Aspinall, Marcus Mietzner, and Vedi R. Hadiz openly explore the consequences of populism in Indonesia and offer solutions based on strengthening democratic institutions and empowering society through political education. They affirm the significance of understanding the roots of societal discontent that drive populism and developing more equitable and inclusive policy approaches to address these issues.

Second, a key force in the counter-populist movement in Indonesia is civil society organizations that actively promote the values of democracy, human rights, pluralism, and tolerance (Matijasevich, 2020; Mietzner, 2012). These civil society movements criticize populist rhetoric that is anti-democratic, intolerant, or anti-pluralist. They play a significant role in raising public awareness of the dangers of polarization and populism and advocating for institutional reforms to strengthen the democratic system. Awareness campaigns through social media, petitions, and peaceful actions are some strategies civil society groups use to counter populist narratives.

Catholic youth activism in Indonesia has become one of the significant counter-movements in responding to the challenges of populism, intolerance, and radicalism, especially those based on religion. Catholic youth significantly promote pluralism, tolerance, and peace amidst the increasing political and social polarization caused by divisive populist rhetoric (Nilan & Wibowanto, 2021). This activism affirms the significance of coexistence in Indonesia's ethnically, religiously, and culturally diverse society and rejects the use of religion as a political tool that can undermine national unity. Catholic youth do not act alone in opposing populism and intolerance. They collaborate with other religious organizations, especially Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), to form interfaith alliances and fight for pluralism and tolerance. This collaboration is part of a more considerable effort to protect the values of diversity characteristic of Indonesia. This alliance also serves as a deterrent against further radicalization that can occur as a result of religious identity politics. By working together across religions, Catholic youth, and other groups can form a more robust and diverse movement to oppose the polarization and conflict caused by populism.

The Gusdurian Network, founded by admirers and successors of the thoughts of Gus Dur (Abdurrahman Wahid), one of Indonesia's former presidents who is famous for his struggle to promote pluralism and religious tolerance, also plays a vital role in countering intolerant populist narratives. The movement holds public campaigns to promote interfaith dialogue and remind people to maintain harmony in a pluralistic society. They also engage in educational programs to raise awareness of the dangers of religious radicalism and extremism driven by populist rhetoric (Rodríguez, 2022). NU and Muhammadiyah, Indonesia's two largest Islamic organizations, actively promote Islamic moderation and reject extremism (Arifianto, 2020; Hapsari et al., 2023; Jubba et al., 2022). NU, in particular, has openly rejected any form of politicization of religion for populist political interests. This anti-intolerance movement is essential in balancing divisive political narratives and ensuring that pluralism and tolerance remain integral to Indonesia's national identity.

Thus, counter-movements to populism in Indonesia combine various forces, including civil society and academia. These movements focus on defending democracy, pluralism, and

human rights amidst the threat of populism, which uses divisive rhetoric and weakens democratic institutions. By voicing the values of tolerance, inclusivity, and civil liberties, these movements aim to counter the negative impacts of populism and ensure that Indonesia remains a pluralistic and peaceful democracy.

Comparison with Other Countries in the Southeast Asian Region

Populism in Indonesia has a lot in common with the phenomenon of populism in other Southeast Asian countries, such as the Philippines, Thailand and Malaysia. While each country has its unique political characteristics, there are common patterns in the way populism develops and affects democratic dynamics.

It is indisputable that the phenomenon of populism has become an integral part of Southeast Asian politics in recent decades. In a region undergoing dynamic social and political transformation, populism has emerged as a response to economic inequality, dissatisfaction with political elites, and the search for national identity in an increasingly globally connected world. Populism in Southeast Asia has unique characteristics compared to that in Europe or Latin America, as it has developed in a political environment characterized by a combination of democracy, authoritarianism, and strong clientelism. In its various forms, populism in the region is often used as a political tool by leaders who want to strengthen their legitimacy by presenting themselves as authentic representations of the will of the people (Kenny, 2021; Kim et al., 2024; Matijasevich, 2020; Robison & Hadiz, 2020).

The emergence of populism in Southeast Asia is inseparable from the historical background and political configuration of each country. Since the end of colonialism, countries in the region have faced major challenges in building stable political systems. In many cases, populism became a tool for leaders to consolidate power by building narratives that positioned them as saviors of the nation from external threats as well as from corrupt political elites. Soekarno in Indonesia used anti-colonial rhetoric and nationalism as the foundation of his leadership (Bhardwaj, 2024; Chong, 2008; Nair, 2023; Nartey & Ernanda, 2020), which was then carried forward by other leaders in various forms (Aspinall, 2015; Hamid, 2014; Raditio & Yeremia, 2022; Ufen, 2024; Wicaksana, 2022). Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines adopted a more aggressive style of populism, with the war on drugs and crime as the main strategy to attract mass support. Meanwhile, Thaksin Shinawatra in Thailand relied on populist policies such as agricultural subsidies and free healthcare to solidify his support base among rural communities (Dressel & Bonoan, 2024; Nair, 2023; Pernia, 2023).

In practice, populism in Southeast Asia often takes the form of identity politics oriented around ethnic, religious or nationalist differences. In Malaysia, populist politics often rely on Malay nationalism as a political instrument, where political parties such as UMNO use ethnic issues and Bumiputera privilege to maintain their political dominance (Balasubramaniam, 2007; Ufen, 2020). This approach is also seen in Indonesia, especially in the context of elections and local elections, where religious and ethnic-based rhetoric is often used to win public sympathy. The political campaign in the 2017 DKI Jakarta regional election, which was colored by sectarian sentiments, is a clear example of how identity-based populism can be used to shape public opinion and consolidate political support (Afrimadona, 2021; Nuryanti, 2021).

However, populism in Southeast Asia is not just about the identity dimension. Many populist leaders in the region also rely on promises of corruption eradication and economic reforms to gain the trust of the people. Rodrigo Duterte, for example, built an image as a leader who dared to fight oligarchs and corruption networks, although in practice his policies were often criticized for violating human rights (Magcamit & Arugay, 2024; Nair, 2023). In Thailand, Thaksin Shinawatra promoted populist programs that provided direct economic benefits to the lower classes, such as microcredit for farmers and universal healthcare policies, which made him very popular among rural communities but also created tensions with urban elites who saw these policies as a threat to the country's economic stability (Hawkins & Selway, 2017; Phongpaichit & Baker, 2008).

While populism is often successful in attracting popular support, it also carries significant

consequences for political stability and democracy. One of the prominent risks of populism is its tendency to undermine democratic institutions by positioning populist leaders as inviolable figures. In the Philippines, Duterte's approach to fighting drugs has not only sparked controversy but also set a bad precedent for the rule of law, with thousands of people executed outside of due process (Lasco, 2020). In Thailand, Thaksin's populism and the backlash from conservative elites have triggered a recurring cycle of coups and political instability, demonstrating how populism can exacerbate social and political polarization within the country (Hewison, 2017; Kongkirati, 2019).

On the other hand, populism can also positively affect increasing political participation and giving voice to previously marginalized groups. Populist leaders are often able to articulate the aspirations of the little people who are not heard in a political system dominated by elites (Connors, 2022). However, without a strong checks and balances mechanism, populism can easily turn into covert authoritarianism, where populist leaders use their popularity to consolidate power exclusively and exclude the opposition.

In conclusion, populism in Southeast Asia is a complex and contradictory phenomenon. On the one hand, it can be an effective mobilization tool in articulating people's aspirations, but on the other hand, it also poses a threat to political stability and democratic development. In all Southeast Asian countries, populism has different dimensions but shares the same basic pattern, namely the use of anti-elite rhetoric, social identity mobilization, and policy promises that directly target people's needs. While populism is inevitable in modern political systems, it is significant for Southeast Asian countries to build strong institutions to ensure that populism does not lead to a weakening of democracy but instead can be directed towards strengthening more inclusive and equitable political representation.

Blind Spots

Research on populism in Indonesia has grown rapidly in recent decades, but previous studies have not adequately addressed several blind spots. These blind spots include the dynamics of populism at the local level, the deeper role of social media in amplifying polarization, and the relationship of populism to long-term economic policy. While many studies have focused on populism at the national level and major populist figures such as Jokowi and Prabowo Subianto, many other important aspects have not received adequate attention.

One of the biggest shortcomings in populism research in the country is the lack of attention to populist movements at the local level. Previous research tends to focus too much on populist political figures at the national level, while in many regions, local leaders use populist strategies to win support. At the regional level, populism often touches on very concrete and urgent issues for people, such as promises of immediate economic improvement, distribution of social assistance, or infrastructure projects that directly impact daily life. Local populism often capitalizes on people's dissatisfaction with Jakarta's central government or political elites. However, not many studies have explored how the dynamics of populism develop in the regions. Local leaders often play on different social and economic issues than national-level ones, offering great opportunities for further research.

Furthermore, while populism is often discussed in the context of anti-elite and anti-corruption rhetoric, there has been little attention to how populism affects long-term economic policy. Many populist leaders in Indonesia, both at the national and local levels, often offer seemingly simple and immediate economic solutions, such as fuel subsidies, direct cash transfers, or massive infrastructure projects. However, research on the effectiveness and sustainability of these populist policies is limited. There is a need to understand whether these populist policies provide long-term benefits to society or are merely temporary solutions designed to win votes. Populism is often oriented towards achieving political victory in the short term without considering the long-term impact on the country's economic stability. In this context, few studies have explored how populist policies contribute to financial instability or even worsen inequality.

Another aspect that has received less attention is social media's role in deepening societal polarization. Many studies have recognized its significance in populist campaigns, but more research is needed to understand how these platforms function in exacerbating social divisions.

Social media allows for the rapid and direct dissemination of information without going through the filter of traditional media, which populists often criticize as part of an elite not on the people's side. However, it also opens up space for disinformation and the spread of provocative rhetoric that can fuel societal polarization. Existing research often discusses how populists use social media to attract voters. However, there has been little in-depth discussion of how populism through social media creates an increasingly fragmented information environment, where groups only hear what they want to hear, reinforcing prejudices and deepening identity conflicts.

The additional blind spot is the impact of populism on democratic institutions. Although some research has touched on how populism can undermine democratic institutions, such as the judiciary or press freedom, there is not enough empirical data showing how populism gradually weakens these institutions. In Indonesia, populists often claim to represent the will of the people. However, on the other hand, they use the political mandate they receive to undermine the checks and balances mechanism in government. For example, the attacks on the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) during Jokowi's administration, which many see as an attempt to weaken anti-corruption institutions, show that populism can threaten a healthy democracy. Populists often capitalize on their popularity to assert personal power and erode press freedom or political opposition, which are supposed to be a counterweight in a democratic system.

Given these blind spots, there is much room for further research on populism in Indonesia. Future studies that delve into the dynamics of populism at the local level, the influence of long-term populist economic policies, and the role of social media in deepening polarization, as well as its impact on democratic institutions, could provide a complete insight into how populism shapes Indonesian politics and society.

CONCLUSION

Populism in Indonesia has developed into a complex political phenomenon, shaping the dynamics of democracy, governance, and public policy. Populism has emerged as an electoral political strategy that transformed extensively through using social media, the exploitation of political identities, and its influence on economic and social policies. Therefore, understanding populism is not just about identifying populist actors and strategies, but also digging deeper into how the phenomenon impacts democratic stability and public welfare in the long run.

One of the foremost findings of this review is how populism often exploits people's sentiments towards political elites, state institutions, and economic policies that are considered unfavorable to the common people. On the one hand, populism provides a space for vulnerable groups' political expression, offers quick solutions to the community's problems, and creates a more direct and effective channel for political mobilization. However, populism also brings serious consequences, especially in deepening social polarization, weakening democratic institutions, and encouraging populist policies that are more oriented towards short-term political interests rather than sustainable structural solutions.

In the context of public policy, populism is often manifested through programs that directly touch people's needs, such as fuel subsidies, social cash transfers, and large-scale infrastructure projects. While such policies may increase the popularity of populist leaders and provide economic impact in the short term, their effectiveness in the long term is debatable. It is not uncommon for these populist policies to compromise fiscal stability, weaken bureaucratic capacity, and create greater political dependency between the people and populist leaders. Therefore, policymakers need to be more selective in designing policies that are not only politically popular but also have a strong planning basis and are oriented towards long-term welfare.

This review also highlights how social media has become the primary space for digital populism to flourish. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and TikTok have changed the way political communication takes place, allowing populists to spread anti-elite narratives, mobilize support and discredit political opponents in a faster and more massive way. However, it has also contributed to increasing social polarization, with society increasingly divided into

groups that only consume information that matches their political preferences. The phenomenon reinforces echo chambers and exacerbates social fragmentation, making it difficult to create a healthy space for dialog in a democracy. Therefore, regulation of disinformation on social media is a major challenge for policymakers, who must find a balance between maintaining freedom of expression and preventing the spread of hoaxes and hate speech that have the potential to damage social cohesion.

From an academic perspective, this review opens up space for further exploration of the dynamics of populism in Indonesia that has not been widely discussed in previous studies. One research gap is how populism develops at the local level, especially in the context of regional head elections. So far, many studies have focused more on populist figures at the national level, while in various regions, populism is also used as an effective political strategy for winning elections. An in-depth study of how populism in the regions interacts with local patronage networks, regional economic dynamics, and local socio-cultural influences will provide a new perspective in understanding populism in the broader political landscape.

In addition, future research should also explore the long-term impact of populist policies on the economy and democracy. Many of the policies adopted by populist leaders are designed to provide short-term electoral gains but lack resilience in the face of global economic changes and domestic structural challenges. Therefore, more empirical and data-driven research is needed to measure the extent to which populist policies provide sustainable benefits to society, or worsen social and economic inequality in the long run.

Further studies are needed too to understand how digital populism affects people's political behavior, especially in shaping perceptions of democracy and state institutions. With the increasing use of social media as a key tool for political campaigns, research can focus on how digital algorithms reinforce or undermine populist narratives, and how the public responds to various digital strategies used by populist actors. A multidisciplinary approach combining big data analysis, qualitative interviews and social experiments can provide more comprehensive insights into the mechanisms at work in digital populism and its implications for democracy in Indonesia.

Furthermore, a comparative study between populism in Indonesia and other countries in Southeast Asia could be a significant academic contribution. Countries such as the Philippines, Thailand and Malaysia have different but similar patterns of populism in terms of identity-based political mobilization and the use of social media as the main tool of political campaigns. By exploring these comparisons in more depth, the research can identify the unique factors that drive populism in each country, as well as how policy responses in other countries can serve as lessons for Indonesia in dealing with the challenges posed by populism.

In summary, populism in Indonesia is not just a temporary political phenomenon but is part of a broader and evolving political dynamic. To manage the impact of populism, a more comprehensive policy approach is needed, which not only focuses on preventing its negative impacts but also encourages a healthier and more inclusive democracy. In an academic context, this review is expected to serve as a platform for further exploration of how populism is shaping Indonesia's political landscape, as well as how best strategies can be implemented to ensure that democracy can survive and thrive in the face of the ever-changing tide of populism.

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