Vedi R. Hadiz


Islamic Populism in Indonesia and the Middle East (2016) describes the broad evolution of Islamic movements in Indonesia and their dissent against the secular state. Focusing on the context of capitalist transformation, Vedi Hadiz also compares the cases of Islamic populism in Indonesia with those in Egypt and Turkey. Hadiz defines Islamic populism as a design to attract a large number of voters whose loyalty is based on political identity; namely, religion and nationalism. The vehicles of contemporary Islamic populism can be embodied in mass organizations, paramilitary groups, through demagoguery, or even terrorist cells.

Hadiz argues that Islamic populism rose because of Muslim's grievance against the neoliberal world order that only holds advantages for a few elites, creating inequalities. This stimulates an anxiety that fuels Islamic populism. Hadiz also believes that Islamic populism emerges because of the political system that gives a more privileged political position for the oligarchy of secular nationalist elites. Throughout the book he predicts how the secular nationalists will prevail in Indonesia's political landscape against the various Islamic movements despite the fact that Muslims are the majority (pp. 44–45).

Hadiz believes that Islamic populism in Indonesia has never come to govern due to four main reasons. First, from the historical evidence, Islamic-based movements have often failed in dominating anti-colonial movements and gave rise to secular nationalist parties that successfully took them over. One example is Syarikat Islam (SI), a Muslim organization in the 1920s with a base of the working class and petty urban traders (p. 52). SI emerged with the spirit of anti-colonial struggles and encroachment by ethnic Chinese business interests, but at the end of their struggle, SI had to give way to the rising secular nationalist movement, as embodied by the rising star of Soekarno, the future first president of Indonesia.

Second, ethnic Chinese, as a significant bourgeois, have successfully constituted the modern economy of Indonesia. They remain dominant in the macro economy and are even key in the production of some commodities. The dominance of ethnic Chinese commerce marginalized smaller businesses and petty bourgeois associated with the Muslim community (ummah), as well as indigenous people (pribumi), from developing their own businesses. Ethnic Chinese businessmen, as an influential bourgeois, have not only successfully constituted the modern economy of Indonesia, but at the same time have also made it difficult for the pribumi businessmen to develop their own commerce and...
have stifled the upward mobility of other groups, which drives resentment and foments tension.

Third, the oligarchy of authoritarian, nationalist, secular elites, such as Soeharto in Indonesia or Mubarak in Egypt, was helped by strong military regimes and successfully suppressed Islamic rebellions and movements. The Indonesian government successfully curbed the Darul Islam (DI) and Tentara Islam Indonesia (TII) movements led by Kartosuwiryo in the early 1960s, both of which were seen as promoting a dangerous ideology. Following the analysis of his mentor, Richard Robison (1986), Hadiz argues that the reasons why the military is against Islamic populism is because they own numerous enterprises in various sectors of the economy ranging from plantations and real estate to commercial enterprises and construction, and the military does not want to lose their economic and structural advantages, which they believe would be in jeopardy under Islamic governance.

Fourth, interestingly, Hadiz finds no direct correlation between the rise of Islamic piety in popular culture and Islamic politics. At the level of everyday life, Muslims unambiguously accept a capitalistic lifestyle without necessarily being less pious. They demonstrate their religious identity through clothes, cuisine, and entertainment, all of which are fully occupied with heavy messages of religious morality (p. 187). In contrast, the Islamic political parties within the Indonesian democratic system have been the biggest losers. Under Soekarno’s Old Order, a Muslim political party called Masyumi was disbanded. The ‘United Development Party’ (PPP) experienced intense repression under the New Order regime of Soeharto, the second president of Indonesia. In the post-Soeharto or reformasi era, each of the Islamic parties have always lost to secular nationalist parties, such as the Indonesian ‘Democratic Party of Struggle’ (PDI-P) and the Golkar Party, which have consistently won elections in both the national and local levels (p. 179).

Hadiz limits his analysis to the realm of political economy by arguing that the rise of Islamic populism is exacerbated by unfulfilled expectations regarding social and economic mobility. Diverging from Ernesto Laclau’s understanding of people/populace/plebs (2007, pp. 224–225), Hadiz equates the notion of ummah with a people. This definition separates the ummah from their emotional bonds related to their religious worldview. Nevertheless, according to Hadiz, the notion of ummah is key for understanding the people who feel deprived and/or frustrated by real or perceived injustices in economic development; emotions based on a similar religious background have sustained the struggle of Islamic movements in negotiations with the secular national state throughout the years. Hadiz argues that it is not a religious worldview per se that stirs up the populist movement, but instead that economic precarity
pushes people to seek the acceptance and familiarity of religious ferment (p. 21, p. 160). Where neoliberalism has failed, many ask, perhaps Islamic governance can succeed.

Here I disagree somewhat with Hadiz, and would argue that many members of Indonesia’s middle class want Islamic governance not out of a sense of precarity, but in order to satisfy their desire to live pious lives not subject to secular governance. The desire to see a political enactment of Islamic values cuts across class lines, and is not primarily driven by economic grievances. Economic discontent no doubt plays a role in Islamic populism, but in my view Hadiz overstates it. Hadiz also confuses Islamic populism with Islamic movements, often conflating the two. The latter should be defined as a struggle to obtain justice and an effort against exploitation without the involvement of a populist demagogue. For instance, from the historical perspective, Syarekat Islam reflects progressive Islam rather than a populist movement (Shiraishi, 1990). Likewise, under the New Order, the movement of Nahdlatul Ulama is best described as “radical traditionalism” (Nakamura, 1996) rather than merely populist. Hadiz pays little attention to the extent to which Islamic movements can be similar or different from populist movements. It must be kept in mind that not every Islamic movement has the aim or potential to be popular.

Despite these critiques, this book enriches studies of political Islam in Indonesia, which tend to be concerned with discussions of so-called radical versus moderate Islam, or even more simplistic “good versus bad” value judgements within a monolithic worldview of Islam (Rabasa, 2003). Instead, Hadiz moves beyond this approach by exploring the multi-class alliances of ummah against the global capitalist system. His analysis succeeds at addressing common anxieties that Muslims will buy into Islamic populism as a way to solve political and economic problems in Indonesia. The book seeks to allay those fears, and reassure readers that secular nationalists will continue to govern Indonesia, even though Islamic populists seek to replace them.

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References

