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Disruptive Signification in a Hybrid Media Ecology: Civilisational Populism in Pakistan, Turkey and Indonesia

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Abstract

This paper employs the ontic/ontological distinction to explore the relationship between religion and populism in Pakistan, Turkey, and Indonesia within a hybrid media ecology. Building on recent discussions of nationalism and populism, the study investigates civilizational populism through the lens of the ontic/ontological distinction, which separates the ‘content’ and ‘form’ of populism. This framework is critical for understanding how populist movements utilize religion to construct notions of ‘the nation,’ ‘the people,’ and ‘civilization.’ The paper examines how Islamic and Islamist positions intertwine with populist narratives, deconstructing the concept of religious populism and exploring how hybrid media dynamics support these constructions. Drawing on 164 semi-structured interviews with populist supporters conducted ahead of the 2023/2024 elections, the study analyses how religious and ideological identifications shape populist narratives. Hybrid media ecology emerges as a vital factor in sustaining the ontic and ontological dimensions of religious populism, amplifying

emotional attachments to ‘us’ while intensifying antagonisms toward the ‘Other.’ The findings reveal how social and legacy media interact to mediate these dynamics, reinforcing populist imaginaries.

Keywords

religious populism – ontic/ontological distinction – hybrid mediascape – islamic and islamist positions – populist supporters

1 Introduction

As its scholarship has grown, definitions of populism have become more nuanced with numerous adjectives being added to provide new meanings or content to what is populism. Religious populism is one of those recent additions to the populism scholarship, one which we aim to explore here in relation to manifestations of populism (its ontic dimension) and attempts to seek the core of populism (its ontological dimension). The aim behind the concept of religious populism is to comprehend and examine the religious dimension (which we deem the ontic dimension, following Vulović & Palonen) of prominent populist manifestations in countries of the global south.¹ Although populism scholarship has strong historical grounding in Latin America,² other parts of the global south where populism thrives in attachment to religious positions and identifications are largely neglected in theories of populism. With religious identification at the core of successful manifestations of populism in places such as Turkey, Myanmar, India, Pakistan, Indonesia, and Malaysia, and arguably, in more disguised forms in ‘mainstream’ populisms across Europe and North America, it seems critical to unpack the relationship between religion and populism, through the contextual lens of the global south.³ It is against that backdrop our primary research question is: **What is the role of religious identification in populist ‘civilization-making’, and how does the hybridization of the media contributes to the simplification of religious and political**

1 Vulović & Palonen 2023.

2 See for example, de la Torre 2017; Kaltwasser 2015

3 Chacko, P. (2018). The right turn in India: Authoritarianism, populism and neoliberalisation. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 48(4), 541–565; Yilmaz, I., & Morieson, N. (2023). Religions and the Global Rise of Civilizational Populism. In *Religions and the Global Rise of Civilizational Populism* (pp. 1–24). Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore.

identities, crucial to the advance of populist politics? As part of a wider comparative study on religious populism, we employ three case studies from Pakistan, Turkey, and Indonesia that effectively mobilize ‘civilization-making’ through a populist frame and logic. The selection of Pakistan, Turkey, and Indonesia for this study on religious populism is based on their shared status as Muslim-majority countries where Islamic identity significantly influences both political and social spheres. Despite their differences, these countries demonstrate commonalities that make them especially relevant for studying religious populism. Each case illustrates distinct ways in which Islamic identity is mobilized to construct populist narratives about ‘the people,’ ‘the nation,’ and ‘civilization.’ These shared features, combined with the unique political and cultural contexts of each country, provide a rich comparative framework for exploring the interplay between religion and populism.

Our analysis is not focused on the structures, programs, or formal classifications of political parties or movements but rather on the discourse employed by populist actors. From this perspective, whether an actor is a political party or a social movement does not detract from its relevance to our study. What matters is their use of populist rhetoric and strategies, particularly how they mobilize civilizational populism and construct “us versus them” narratives within their respective contexts. Although the forms of Islamist politics differ significantly across the three nations, these ontic differences enhance the comparative analysis by showcasing how populist discourse operates in varied organizational settings. Drawing on Clifford Geertz’s⁴ insights into the connection between politics and cultural histories, the study explores how Islamist populist discourses in all three countries shape mainstream politics and social identities. These discourses link essentialist conceptions of Islam to political notions such as the ‘nation,’ ‘people,’ and ‘civilization,’ illustrating the powerful role of religion in constructing political imaginaries across diverse contexts.

Indonesia, the world’s largest Muslim-majority country, provides a case where religious populism operates through grassroots movements like the Islamic Defenders Front (Front Pembela Islam, FPI). Unlike Turkey and Pakistan, Indonesia’s pluralist democracy and ethnically diverse society create a distinct backdrop for studying religious populism. Here, populist actors mobilize Islamic identity to influence public discourse and political outcomes, as seen in events like the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election. Indonesia’s case demonstrates how religious populism can thrive outside formal political institutions, leveraging civil society and grassroots movements.

4 Geertz, C. (2013). Religion as a cultural system. In *Anthropological approaches to the study of religion* (pp. 1–46). Routledge.

Pakistan represents a case where religious identity is foundational to state formation and national identity. Established as a homeland for Muslims in South Asia, Pakistan's political landscape has consistently tied Islam to governance and societal norms. Leaders like Imran Khan and the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) have used Islamic values to construct populist narratives that resonate with a broad base, framing 'the people' as virtuous and moral in contrast to a corrupt elite. Pakistan's hybrid political system, with its unique interaction between military influence and democratic processes, adds further complexity to how populist rhetoric is shaped and disseminated.

Turkey offers a contrasting context as a country with secularist roots undergoing an Islamic revival under the Justice and Development Party (AKP). The AKP, led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has effectively merged Islamic identity with populist appeals, drawing on Ottoman history and Islamic civilization to define 'the people.' Turkey's case highlights how religious populism can operate within and transform a secular democratic framework. This makes it particularly valuable for understanding how populism adapts to and reshapes political systems with strong secular traditions.

All three countries show how Islamic identity is central to populist constructions of 'the nation,' 'the people,' and 'civilization,' often employed to create moral dichotomies between 'us' and 'them.' On the other hand, they vary in their political systems (hybrid democracy, secular democracy, and pluralist democracy, respectively) and the forms of Islamic mobilization they employ (political parties, social movements, or both). These differences enrich the analysis, showing how religious populism adapts to diverse political and cultural contexts.

2 **Ontic and Ontological Dimensions of Religious Populism: A Laclauian Framework**

In this article, we employ a Laclauian approach to populism as an "antagonistic form of us-building/community-making" that is made possible through the linking together of people, and their emotions.⁵ Compared to other theories of populism, a Laclauian lens can distinguish between the ontic (empirical political struggles) and the ontological (the status of *being* in *doing* politics). Notwithstanding the different and contrasting theoretical, conceptual, and methodological contributions that have emerged out of the "Essex School" that

⁵ Vulović & Palonen 2023.

draws on the works of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, what these have in common is the privilege placed upon the ontological dimension that underlies political meaning-making.⁶ Debates among Essex School theorists continue to exist as to the degree of ‘ontological privilege’ in processes of hegemonization and populist articulation.⁷ With respect to the role of religion in hegemonic populist struggles, the distinction between the ontic and ontological is useful in discerning “real” versus “logical” oppositions.⁸ Real opposition is natural and not antagonistic, whereas a logical opposition is social, and therefore, antagonistic.⁹ In populist scholarship, real and logical oppositions are often conflated, and logistical opposition is oftentimes subsumed by real opposition, making social conflicts appear natural, and therefore, unresolvable. Religion, and religious identification, is historically used to conflate the ontic and the ontological, and make logical oppositions appear as real oppositions.

In the same way Vulović & Palonen argue that ‘the nation’ provides “content” for populist discourses, ‘religion’ is being used to ascribe socially meaningful content to populist discourses. This refers to the social terrain upon which meaning-making occurs and emphasizes the contingent nature of that meaning-making.¹⁰ Vulović and Palonen address the Laclauian distinction between ontic and ontological to differentiate between the inherent characteristics of discursive structures (defined by relationality and lack), and its empirical manifestation in human and political practice. This is the distinction Laclau¹¹ and Mouffe¹² make between “the political” (the ontological) and “politics” (the ontic). What distinguishes Laclauian (and Mouffe-ian) populist theory, further illustrated by Vulović & Palonen, is the distinction between the ontological “structure” and ontic “content”. The ontological structure, or what some theorists name the “form” of populism, is the emptiness that

6 Laclau & Mouffe 2001 [1985].

7 See for example, Biglieri & Cadahia 2021; de Cleen & Stavrakakis 2017; Devenney et al. 2016; Marchart 2018, 2020.

8 Devenney et al. 2016, 2.

9 The clash of civilizations argument is derived from “real” opposition in the claim there is an inevitable social clash between social identities – or religions – that is grounded in incommensurable philosophical and political positions between people. We follow Devenney et al. (2016, 2) in proposing that a “real” opposition is naturally unavoidable (“it occurs in the natural world”), whereas a “logical” opposition is a particular way to construct antagonism. One dominant way antagonism has been politically constructed historically disguises that which is “logical” with that which is “real” (hence why some scholars arrive at the conclusions that some oppositions are real).

10 Vulović & Palonen 2023.

11 Laclau 2005.

12 Mouffe 2013.

gives populism its specific potential to link together a multiplicity of contingent demands. This emptiness refers to an inherent lack that exists within any form of “community-making/us-building” and populism disguises by taking a shift from “content” to “form”.¹³ Populism masks the way it has “no ideological core”,¹⁴ which constitutes its form, by presenting itself with strong ideological content. Populism fundamentally lacks an inherent ideological core, a characteristic that constitutes its “form.” However, it compensates for this emptiness by presenting itself with strong ideological “content.” This content often appears contradictory, lacking in substance, or even vulgar, yet the power of populism persists because its framework is grounded in affective dimensions such as passions and emotions. Crucially, it is not the specific content of grievances that gives populism its power but rather the shared sense of unfulfillment or lack that unites people. This affective foundation allows populism to endure, even when its ideological facade is emptied of substantive or coherent meaning.

However, this ideological content, which predominated the “ideational” school of populist theory, is the superficial layer to the ‘community-making/us-building’ logic of populism. This logic entails the linking of socially meaningful contents (e.g., identifiable discontents), but rather than the content itself, it is the shared unfulfillment (or lack) of these contents that accounts for the power of populism.¹⁵ Emphasis on the form (or logic) of populism brings to the foreground the contingent nature of the ontic dimension. It can explain, as Vulović & Palonen propose in their work, the entanglement of populism and nationalism, or the conflation of the two in research, as de Cleen and Stavrakakis points to, for example.¹⁶ Through a definition of populism that integrates the ontological and the ontic, nationalism can be understood as a “form of populism” rather than being separate from it.¹⁷

When we turn to the relationship between populism and religion, the same approach can be utilized to both separate and connect the ontological and the ontic. The form concerns the way religion is used to capture an antagonistic relationship through the linking of unfulfilled desires and demands, whereas the content reflects the religious and ideological core of ‘the people’. Following the critique of Vulović & Palonen concerning the preoccupation with ‘the people’ in the populism scholarship (what they refer to as “peopleist”), the article

13 Vulović & Palonen 2023.

14 Eklundh & Knott 2020, 11.

15 Vulović & Palonen 2023.

16 de Cleen & Stavrakakis 2017.

17 Vulović & Palonen 2023.

intends to adopt a similar approach to examine the entanglement of populism with religious iterations to civilization-making. We thus draw on the frame of ‘community-making/us-building’ used by Vulović & Palonen that we understand to be ontological in its logic of mobilizing the “empty core of populism”,¹⁸ and ontic in terms of the specific contents and iterations attached to it. What makes such ‘civilization-making’ populist (because these two conditions are not populist a priori), is in the intent of fomenting a hegemonic struggle that mobilizes particular contents around a “constitutive outside”.¹⁹ This constitutive outside is the ontological dimension of populism in that it concerns the “lack” or “incompleteness” of social identity (and therefore, society) that is imprinted onto a social object (the “threatening” other).

Religion, then, becomes the content that occupies the “empty” frame of populism.²⁰ Not unlike nationalism, religion becomes the key referent that consolidates different contents that can be (vaguely) associated with a religious position. When a populist politics emerges around ‘the nation’, contents are drawn together by the “various ways they are associated with ‘the nation’” (Anastasiou 2020). With religion, the geographical and cultural confines that are associated with the nation are extended. That is not to argue religious populism abandons nationalism; on the contrary, nationalism links the spatio-temporal context to religious populism. It is, however, theoretically unsatisfactory to simply argue religion and nationalism operate together in the consolidation of contents. It begs the question to what extent nationalism is religious, and religion is nationalistic, to draw out the ideological essence of both, and discern their function within a modern communications context.

Following the proposition by Lone Sorensen, there is a “natural congruence between populist disruptive performances and the *demands* on political performance by the modern media environment”.²¹ Populist performance and media demands exist on a junction that juxtaposes inauthenticity – performed by the elite – and authenticity – performed by the true representatives of ‘the people’.²² Reactionary populists claim to deny the media, however, in their denial they meet the new demands of the media to perform authenticity, relatability, and visibility.²³ This can be in the form of emotional perfor-

18 Knott 2020.

19 Laclau & Mouffe 2001 [1985].

20 Laclau 2005; Mouffe 2011; Vulović & Palonen 2023.

21 Sorensen 2021, 199, italics added.

22 Sorensen 2021.

23 Sorensen 2021.

maturity, such as Erdogan's public weeping²⁴ or the vulgarity of Trump,²⁵ that functions to replace legacy media with a mediation that brings people in direct relationship with their political representatives. This presumed authenticity is a mediatized relationship between political representatives, 'the people', and the "media logic"²⁶ of legacy media as the antagonistic interlocutor.²⁷ Other than what it may appear to be, populist performances on social media are not unmediated but mediated by the technical characteristics and social practices intrinsic to social media technologies.²⁸ This mediation illustrates what scholars of social media sometimes refer to as "network media logics",²⁹ rather than one strand of media, such as social media (in the associative sense) or legacy media (in the dissociative sense). Rather, using the form/content distinction, populist performance is situated within a hybrid media ecology (*and* economy) wherein the content *and* form of populism is mediated. After all, mediation is a circular relationship of (re)production, (re)circulation, and (re)interpretation, using Nick Couldry's definition, which draws not only on content but also on the constant antagonisms that are formed between the mediators and the content.³⁰ There is thus the form of populism, which refers to this dialectical relationship, and the content of populism that relates to the resignification of the ontic components.

An ontic-ontological approach to the empirical study of populism integrates the emotive, or affective, dimension that is intrinsic to any kind of political articulation, but particularly prominent in hegemonic struggles, such as populism. After all, whatever ontic form it takes, populism is the struggle for hegemonic power, or at the very least, the struggle to disrupt the hegemonic order. Therefore, affect, and the emotions through which it is expressed, are fundamental to populist articulations.³¹

With respect to religious populism, a cohesive 'us' is constructed on the grounds of an antagonism that is affectively mobilized through an ontological logic that unites religious ideas and positions, with desires and demands that are deemed religious, but are rather ideological, and therefore political, in character. Affect, then, is mobilized through a religious bond that demarcates

24 Aslan 2021.

25 Žižek 2021.

26 Snow and Altheide (1979) define media logic as the norms and conventions that define media operations.

27 Snow & Altheide 1979.

28 Sorensen 2021.

29 Klinger and Svensson 2015.

30 Couldry 2008.

31 Vulović & Palonen 2023.

certain (monotheistic) religions and religious collectives from others. Populism has been hijacked to construct a righteous, moral, and virtuous ‘people’ that imposes sharp delineations around a religious or civilizational past that transcends modern spatio-temporal realities. Compared to nationalism, religious identification can extend the political space upon which hegemonic struggles are carried out. Religious and civilizational collective memories are not limited to the modern imposition of nation-states; religious bonds can be linked to civilizations that combined a multitude of ethnic, cultural, and religious people.

The name of religion is important here. The name of Islam occupies a structural position in the discourse. What that means is that it is the *name* of Islam, rather than the meaning of *Islam* that is given its political potential. In other words, the name of Islam accredits ‘the people’ its central position.

3 Populism and Civilizationism

‘Religion’, if understood as a “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things ... set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them” is a rather narrow concept.³²

Civilization, even if defined in primarily religious terms, may at times be a more useful concept to employ in populist rhetoric insofar as it can bind together religious believers and non-believers into a single group. For example, when populists such as Geert Wilders define the West as a Judeo-Christian civilization, this discourse seeks to unify perceived cultural Christians and Jews, as well as practicing Christians and Jews, into a singular identity group. At the same time, it excludes and “others” those who fall outside this cultural framework, such as Muslims. Wilders has repeatedly emphasized this narrative in his speeches.³³ However, civilization needs not encompass or draw on religion. The claim that the West is a Judeo-Christian civilization, as Roy observed a decade ago, does not represent in any way a return to Christian religiosity among Europeans.³⁴ And yet religion is often present in civilization discourse even in supposedly atheist societies.³⁵ Secularism itself is seen as part of a continuity

32 Durkheim 2012, 62.

33 Geert Wilders (2011, March 25). *Speech by Geert Wilders in Rome*. The Legal Project. Retrieved from <https://www.legal-project.org/1248/speech-geert-wilders-in-rome-25th-of-march-2011>; Geert Wilders (2015, April 13). *Speech in Dresden at PEGIDA Demonstration*. Retrieved from <https://geertwilders.nl/english/1920-speech-gw-pegida-1304153>.

34 Roy 2013.

35 Carrai 2020.

that can be described as the Judeo-Christian tradition.³⁶ Religious identification does not play a significant role in defining Chinese civilization within this project, although the spread of non-Chinese religions such as Christianity and Islam in China is considered to pose a threat to Chinese culture, and thus the activities of Muslims and Christians are frequently curtailed by the state. There is thus a close relationship between religion and civilization, although the two concepts can exist independently of one another.

Scholarship on the role and position of the concept ‘civilization’ in populist discourse is a relatively recent development, precipitated by the rise of right-wing populist movements across Europe in the 2010s. Rogers Brubaker first drew attention to what he termed the “civilizational turn” occurring within a group of right-wing populist parties in north-western Europe, and exemplified by Geert Wilders’ Party for Freedom in the Netherlands.³⁷ Wilders claims that the conflict is between two opposing civilizations: one Judeo-Christian and Humanist, and thus secular, rational, liberal, and peaceful, and the other Islamic, and thus backward, fanatical, illiberal, and violent.

Civilizationism is a political and cultural framework that defines identity and societal belonging through the lens of civilizational heritage, emphasizing shared religion, history, and cultural values as the core elements that bind a group together. Unlike nativism – which, as Newth critiques, often conflates with xenophobia and populism and can obscure the racist ideologies underpinning hostile immigration policies – or racism, which is rooted in biological hierarchies, civilizationalism constructs a broader identity that transcends national borders and ethnic lines.³⁸ Civilizationalism does not inherently exclude elitist dimensions. In other words, civilizationalism is not necessarily populist. Even when it constructs an opposition between ‘the people’ and ‘the other,’ as well as ‘the people’ and ‘the elite,’ these oppositions are contextually contingent and can be nuanced. Thus, civilizationalist rhetoric can be employed both in populist frameworks that oppose elites and in elitist ideologies that justify hierarchical or supremacist systems. Only when merged with populism, it constructs the people and elite along civilizational lines. Hence, the term “civilisational populism” (Yilmaz and Morieson 2022; 2023) makes this distinction.

36 Roy 2013; Morieson 2021.

37 Brubaker 2017.

38 Newth, G. (2023). Rethinking ‘Nativism’: Beyond the Ideational Approach. *Identities*, 30(2), 161–180, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2021.1969161>.

While Brubaker confines the ‘civilisational turn’³⁹ in populism to north-west Europe – perhaps because in that region of Europe it makes little sense to speak of a ‘religious populism’ when Christian practice has become so diminished and politically irrelevant – other scholars find analogous phenomena occurring not merely across Europe and in the United States, but beyond the West, including in India, Turkey, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, and parts of Latin America.⁴⁰

Building on these observations of civilisationism in the discourse of populists globally, Yilmaz & Morieson make a larger claim than most other scholars and argue that it is possible to describe a particular ‘civilizational populism’.⁴¹ This they define as “a group of ideas that together considers that politics should be an expression of the “*volonté générale*” (general will) of the people, and society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, ‘the people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’ who collaborate with the dangerous others belonging to other civilizations that are hostile and present a clear and present danger to the civilization and way of life of the people”.

According to Yilmaz and Morieson, in civilizational populism ‘civilisationism’ defines ‘the people’ (those who belong to our civilization) and the ‘others’ (those who do not belong to our civilization) and helps to mobilize support for populist movements by providing a reason to overthrow the ‘elite’ (i.e. ‘elites’ collaborate with the civilizational ‘other’ and in doing so weaken ‘our’ civilization and prevent ‘the people’ from flourishing). In this way, Yilmaz and Morieson, like Brubaker, centre their focus on what we might describe as the *ontic* element of populism, in this case the signifier ‘the people’, and how civilizational identity is used by populists to define the ingroup and outgroups within their societies. Their approach is thus *people* and *content* oriented.

What they and Brubaker do not do is explicitly separate the ontological form – the way the concept of civilization is used to create an antagonistic relationship through the linking of desires and demands – from the ontic content; that is, the civilizational core of ‘the people’. This paper, therefore, examines both the contingent ontic content (civilization, religion) and the ontological

39 The civilizational turn did not emerge suddenly but developed over time through various ideological and cultural shifts. In the context of this article, however, our focus is on the manifestation and operationalization of civilizationism within contemporary populist politics, particularly its entrenchment in modern discourses since the late 20th century and its rise to prominence in the 21st century, see Camus, Jean-Yves, and Nicolas Lebourg. 2017. *Far-Right Politics in Europe*. Translated by Jane-Marie Todd. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

40 Kaya & Tecmen 2019; Morieson 2023; Yilmaz & Morieson 2022, 2023.

41 Yilmaz & Morieson 2023.

form that constitutes the ‘us’ or the populist community within the context of a hybrid media ecology.

4 Methods

To better understand the ontological and ontic dimensions of religious populism, this article examines religious iterations in interviews with populist supporters in Pakistan, Turkey, and Indonesia. We conducted semi-structured interviews with 164 populist supporters in these three countries, exploring their investment in religious and ideological positions (e.g., religious practices), ideas (e.g., Islamic law and jurisprudence), and ideals (e.g., perceptions towards a past and future caliphate). Populist supporters were identified on the grounds of their self-expressed support for the respective parties and not their adherence to their discourse. In other words, ‘populist supporters’, as a heuristic, are those who *proclaim* to support the political discourse, but may not do so in their actual ‘lived practice’.⁴² Interviews were carried out in the capital cities and, in the case of Indonesia, also in nearby cities where there is notable support for the FPI. Local researchers conducted the interviews, which were mostly conducted in-person in the native language. Interviews were then transcribed to English by researchers with extensive knowledge of the subject matter, and coded as part of a wider research dataset, using the textual analysis software, NVivo. We developed a qualitative coding structure that aligned with the theoretical premises of the Laclaudian, populist school of thought. This involved clear thematic and conceptual delineations between discursive nodes that were classified into four categories: 1) emotions, 2) democratic and political institutions, 3) religious identity, and 4) populism. Interviews were deductively coded and analysed, bearing in mind the aim and scope of the research question, which is primarily interested in seeking the religious ontic nature in antagonistic civilization-making.

We do not intend to argue these 164 interviews represent all the voices of populist supporters in these countries, and neither is that our aim. Rather, our research intention is to examine the entanglement between religion and populism to constitute ‘the people’, and how this is realized in a hybridized mediascape, and our position is that certain interviews capture that relationship better than others by way of their adherence to the ‘official’

42 For more on ‘lived practice’ in the context of Islamism, see de Groot Heupner, S., & Sinclair, K. (2023). Locating the Ideal State: The Practice of Place by Far Right and Islamist Parties. *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 44(2), 239–256.

top-down discourse. With that we mean the discourse of the respective parties/groups in each country, namely Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) in Pakistan, Turkey, and Indonesia, respectively. PTI and AKP are political electoral parties, whereas FPI is a banned political organization that does not participate in traditional electoral politics. Because this study is interested in popular ideological discourse and not political power in the traditional sense (through the ontic realm of politics), this variance is not considered a weakness. On the contrary, FPI is the closest political representative resembling a populist Islamist structure of discourse that is comparable to AKP and PTI with a similar degree of popularity in civil society at different times in recent years (FPI increased significant popularity in 2017 during the so-called 'Ahok' protests, yet its influence has gradually waned since 2019 when the organization was banned).

The article adopts a discourse-theoretical approach examining the religious positions and perceptions of populist supporters. The aim is to identify the 'ontic' and 'ontological' dimensions, and examine the entanglement between Islamism, as a discourse, and populism, as the antagonistic logic of community-making/us-building.⁴³ It renders visible the religious and ideological positions in view of the populist claim 'the people' constitute a superior civilization. Following Palonen's earlier work, we adhere to the aim to "strip away' any specific content" that fills religious populism in these countries to examine the 'workings' of populism in religious contexts to disrupt the current secular hegemonic order.⁴⁴ We depart from the premise that the *form* of populism provides the foundation for an antagonistic articulation of the 'us', which is present in the specific ideological constructions of Islamism, as illustrated from the case studies examined here. By employing the concept of civilizationism, we explore the ontic dimension of 'the people' defined as 'the civilization', as a broad political community that transcends space (i.e., borders and nations) and time (i.e., past, present, and future). We ask what attitudes, emotions, and sentiments constitute 'the civilization' – or the 'content' of Islamist populism – and how these 'contents' construe meaning to the *form* of Islamist populism – the specific antagonistic logic that underlies 'us-building'.⁴⁵

Fourteen emotions were selected prior to the interviews, as part of the larger quantitative dataset that includes an emotional tendency survey undertaken by interview participants. This dataset is excluded from this article because

43 Vulović & Palonen 2023.

44 Palonen 2020.

45 Vulović & Palonen 2023.

considerable conclusions can be drawn from the interview dataset alone. These emotions were selected based on a systematic review of the emotion and populism literature and used as ‘codes.’ A team of researchers with knowledge of the state of populism in the three respective countries coded emotive responses against one or more of the fourteen emotions: Furious, Proud, Hopeful, Angry, Annoyed, Disgusted, Cheerful, Hateful, Disdained, Nostalgic, Happy, Sad, Depressed and Anxious.

We loosely draw on Vulović and Palonen’s formula that attaches emotions such as fear and pride, and relations such as loyalty and betrayal (the sum of which constitutes the ontic component of populism), to specific contents that draw on *religious* or *civilizational* dimensions, like *ummah* or Islam. The minimal formula is as follows:⁴⁶

$$\text{Populism} = \text{Us}^{\text{affect 1}} + \text{Them}^{\text{affect 2}}$$

This can be further explained as follows:⁴⁷

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Populism} = & \text{Us (demand = demand = ..) }^{\text{affect = affect = ...}} \\ & + \\ & \text{Them (Other = Other = ...) }^{\text{affect = affect = ...}} \end{aligned}$$

Vulović and Palonen’s decentralization of ‘the people’ is reflected in the antagonistic stance populist supporters take toward mainstream media, which shapes the content and form of populism. This is evident in how populist supporters mediatize their positions within a hybrid media environment, demonizing mainstream media while legitimizing alternative media spaces. By occupying these alternative platforms, they reinforce their antagonism toward legacy media.

The relationship between populist supporters and the ‘leader’ – whether framed as religion or nation – within this hybrid media ecology reveals why they conceptualize ‘the people,’ ‘Islam,’ and ‘civilization/the ummah’ in specific ways. This direct connection between ‘the people’ and the ‘leader’ strengthens the validity of populist claims, embedding notions of religion and civilization within their discourse.

46 Palonen 2020; Palonen & Sunnercrantz 2021; Palonen & Vulović 2023.

47 This expanded formula is a slight variation of Palonen’s formula in extending ‘affect’ as a chain of equivalence.

5 Findings

Islamist national populism = The people (national sovereignty = cultural unity = Muslim solidarity = national identity ...) ^{love = pride = happy}

+

The enemy (immoral subjectivity = secular ideology = political extremists = polarization = corruption = LGBT ...) ^{anger = resentment = anxious = disgust}

Although coming together as one *ummah* is a valid theme in Islamist populism, it is closely tied within the context of ‘the nation’. In other words, the *ummah*, through the logic of Islamist populism, is situated within the confines of ‘the nation’. That is not to say, however, ‘the people’ can be substituted for ‘the nation’, where it can be considered a form of populist nationalism with religion a singular demand. Rather, ‘the people’ form the ‘us’ in the very intersection of ‘the nation’ or national identity, culture, and sovereignty, and a religious bond.

In Indonesia, this is evident in the support for Pancasila, the ‘five principles’ of Indonesia’s official philosophy including belief in one God, social justice, and Indonesia’s territorial unity. Although Pancasila does not privilege Islam, it is, according to Islamist populism supporters, the unifying force that guides Indonesians towards a civilized humanity that they consider foundational principles of Islam. Or in the words of one interviewee, “the rules of Pancasila are also very Islamic” (FP101). This metaphoric relation between Pancasila – as the symbol of ‘the nation’ – and Islam induces strong emotions of love, pride, and hope. Using the words of FP103: “If we are Muslims, we must be proud as Muslims, and [therefore] we must also be proud as adherents of Pancasila”. Thus, in the formula of Islamist populism where ‘the people’ are tied to ‘the nation’, Islam functions to direct the nation *away* from morally corruptive and disruptive forces that undermine national sovereignty, cultural unity, and Muslim solidarity. These forces are culturally, ethnically, and religiously diverse, however share in their universality an immoral subjectivity, secular ideology, and individual interests. Although secularity is not necessarily demonized as a subject position, it is antagonized as an ideology that reduces religious belonging and solidarity *as a precept for political unity* (as ‘the people’, ‘the nation’, or ‘civilization’).

In the case of Pakistan, the military occupies this position, who is considered to exploit economic and material resources for their own political ends (not in the interest of ‘the people’). In Indonesia, it is corrupt politicians who strongly occupy this place by merely using religion to gain political and electoral power (not in the interest of ‘the people’).

For AKP supporters, it is mainly the foreign hegemonic powers that have impeded the progress of Turkey and systematically undermine the realization of a modern 'Ottoman' empire. Thus, Islamist populists consider themselves acting out of the interest of the collective, with Islam their primary guidance as to what the moral and ethical coordinates of 'the people' are. These coordinates serve not only to inform 'the people' but simultaneously and consequently subvert the influence and reality of 'the enemy'.

Civilizationist populism = The *ummah* (authoritarian leadership = Muslim cosmopolitanism = empire (Ottoman, Mughal ...) = caliphate ...) nostalgia = hope = empathy

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The Other (Western hegemony = democratic leadership = secular politics = foreign interference = self-interest = ...) sadness = fear = hatred

The above formulas are not exclusive or fixed; they operate together in a wider constitution of populism. This sometimes takes the form of Islamist populism where 'the people' are closely tied to 'the nation', and other times it is a populism where 'civilization' connects 'the people' and 'the nation' to a larger territorial and historical claim. This, seemingly, transcends 'the nation', with 'the people' taking on a civilizational character through a more general signification of 'the *ummah*'. However, 'the nation' remains intertwined in civilizationist populism through the metaphoric relation between the *name* of the nation (e.g., Pakistan) and the *name* of the religion (i.e., Islam).

In other words, in Islamist populism, the name of the nation is attached to Islam through the imagination of 'the *ummah*'. The name of the nation, in an ideal sense, is the representative of 'the *ummah*' in the way it contains stories, mythologies, and visions of hope, love, and belonging. Civilisationist populist imaginaries are both rooted in the spatial coordinates of the nation, and the spatial coordinates of the imagined ideal past and future. Where those coordinates *are* is, ultimately, contingent. This is supported by the responses from interviewees that convey significantly varying positions concerning the *place* where 'the *ummah*' is ought to thrive.

The different formulas constitute different emotions. This is an important finding because it supports the proposition that different ontic manifestations of populism draw on different emotions. These emotions are, in similar vein to the *contents*, contingent and flexible. That is to say that emotions of nostalgia, hope and empathy attached to 'the *ummah*' in a civilisationist structure are not necessarily excluded from 'the people' in an Islamist formulation. What this shows, however, is that different ontic 'narratives' depend on different emotions.

Combining civilisationist and Islamist paradigms in a populist construction thus *extends* the equivalence of emotions, meaning *more* emotions are activated and mobilized. ‘The other’ is attached to emotions of sadness, fear, and hatred, whereas ‘the enemy’ provokes anxiety, disgust, resentment, and anger. When we then look at religious populism in the context of these countries more ontologically, what we see is a long chain of emotions that combines emotions attached to ‘the other’ and emotions attached to ‘the enemy’. This is how the ontic/ontological distinction can help to see how religious populism is mobilizing a wide range of contents, emotions, and people.

The nuanced interplay of emotions attached to different structural contents sheds light on contradictions in the responses of interviewees. While all interviewees express positive emotions like love and pride toward ‘the people’ and ‘the ummah,’ these are accompanied by ambivalent or negative emotions that challenge these positive sentiments. For instance, nostalgia for the ummah – rooted in the perceived loss of the Ottoman Empire, Western dominance, capitalist systems, or secular politics – is closely tied to sadness, often outweighing resentment, anger, or disgust aimed at ‘lived’ enemies in their immediate experience.

The variability in how interviewees ascribe sadness reflects populism’s flexibility, allowing supporters to construct personal narratives within its overarching meta-discourse. This sadness is often linked to ideologies like capitalist hegemony, viewed as undermining societal morality, and can manifest as resentment toward perceived foreign interference or ideological corruption, such as the emergence of LGBT identities. However, interviewees simultaneously express admiration, love, and pride for principles of tolerance and diversity, associating these with ‘the nation,’ ‘the people,’ or ‘the ummah.’ Negative emotions, like resentment, are thus frequently absorbed into more positive affective frameworks, underscoring the fluid and adaptive emotional structure underpinning populist narratives.

The interviews revealed complex attitudes toward legacy media and its role in shaping perceptions of Islam, the ummah, and populist politics. Here, PTI supporters in Pakistan expressed the most mistrust in traditional media, with a whopping 79% holding negative views regarding broadcast and print media houses. They described mainstream media as biased, agenda-driven, and complicit in serving the interests of the so-called elite. Many respondents framed legacy media as an extension of the political and economic establishment that PTI and Imran Khan seek to challenge. As such, it was unsurprising to see terms and phrases such as ‘corrupt’ ‘propaganda machine’ and ‘pawn in the hands of the establishment’ used by PTI supporters to frame media outlets. Additionally, ‘ummah’ emerged as an important theme in these discussions, with PTI supporters criticising legacy media for failing to counter Islamophobic tropes and

adequately representing the global Muslim community. For example, according to PTI53, to “stop Islamophobia, obviously, there should be some counter arguments and there is no counter argument. I mean, just like, let’s say, if there is a lie and [traditional media houses] spread in a way that there is no opposition of that lie, nobody tells you the truth, the lie would be accepted as the truth”. This frustration with legacy media often led PTI supporters to turn to alternative media platforms, particularly social media, for news and political engagement. 45 out of the 57 PTI participants expressed trust in social media platforms such as X, WhatsApp, and YouTube, citing these platforms as credible and non-biased in the context of populist politics.

FPI supporters also voiced frustration with the mainstream media, but to a lesser degree, and in a manner distinct from that of PTI supporters. 64% of FPI supporters disapproved of the mainstream media citing misrepresentation of FPI, promotion of Western culture, and perpetuation of Islamophobia as the main points of criticism. For example, FPI12 emphasised that FPI has “many positive sides” as shown on the party’s YouTube pages although “what is framed in the [traditional] media is negative”. These comments challenge the credibility of traditional media, highlighting its bias against anti-establishment politics. Additionally, a common consensus amongst FPI supporters was that legacy media is an extension of the global elite, which seeks to erode traditional Indonesian culture by promoting LGBT and non-traditional family structures. As such, they viewed traditional media as a civilisational threat complicit in diluting the religious and cultural values of Indonesia. Interestingly, similar to the views of PTI supporters, FPI supporters also blamed mainstream media of fuelling Islamophobia with one respondent even saying “we must Jihad through opinion” as Islam is marginalised on electronic and print media (FPI13). This distrust in traditional media corroborated with an increased trust in social media, with 46 out of the 59 FPI respondents holding positive views of the latter. Collectively, this meant that FPI viewed its peripheral content on social media platforms such as YouTube as the true representation of people’s will that stands in opposition to elite-controlled legacy media.

While AKP supporters also acknowledged the potential pitfalls of traditional media as highlighted by PTI and FPI supporters, they showed remarkably low level of distrust in traditional media (40%). AKP supporters viewed traditional media as generally aligned with their values and interests, reflecting their party’s influence within the media landscape. This alignment likely contributed to their perception of legacy media as a credible source, in contrast to the skepticism prevalent among PTI and FPI supporters. Various respondents expressed trust in pro-AKP media outlets such as TRT, ATV, and A Haber, viewing it not only as a source of information but also a battleground where Western and

secular ideas are contested with narratives aligned with their ideological and cultural beliefs. For example, AK43 declared “I trust TRT because it is the state channel” while AK46 credited pro-AKP traditional media with countering “popular culture’s entirely Western depiction of the human figure”. These statements reflect how the support for traditional media in Turkey is linked to its apparent role in preserving the cultural identity of the country. Additionally, when asked about perceptions of social media, only 45% of AKP supporters professed positive views. Here, similar to opinions on traditional media, many respondents expressed a desire for greater control over social media to safeguard cultural and moral values, viewing it as a battleground for competing ideologies. Despite this, they still favored AKP-controlled traditional media as a more reliable and effective platform for promoting their perspectives.

It is witnessed that the hybrid media ecology emerged as a crucial component of civilisational populism, enabling populist supporters to navigate between legacy and social media to construct and disseminate their narratives. These narratives reflected the unique political and social context of the individual countries. For example, interviewees in Pakistan and Indonesia expressed distrust in traditional media while frequently referencing social media as a platform for authentic representation and solidarity-building, bypassing the perceived gatekeeping of legacy outlets. In contrast, AKP supporters exhibited a greater trust in traditional media than social media, perhaps due to the fact that the AKP controls 90% of the traditional media coverage whereas the opposition is stronger in the cyberspace.

6 Discussion

While there are ontic differences to the logic of populist discourse in these three countries, we have taken the most general level of analysis to place focus on the similarities, instead of the differences. These ontic differences, following the aims and theoretical framework of this paper, can overshadow the ontological commonalities, and arguably, synergy that provides populism its disruptive potential. Contextually, albeit at varying degrees in these countries, this disruptive potential of Islamist populism is real and persisting. Even though the AKP has lost influence in local elections,⁴⁸ the PTI is no longer in

48 BBC News. (2024, April 1). *Turkish local elections: Opposition stuns Erdogan with historic wins*. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-68704375>.

office,⁴⁹ and the FPI had minimal effect on recent electoral outcomes,⁵⁰ their populist discourses remain socially relevant in different segments of society. In other words, their presumed weakening political influence does not undermine the affective reasoning that supporters adhere to in their justification for the validity of the representation of ‘the *ummah*’.

Our formulas demonstrate any leader needs to strongly articulate a sense of Muslim solidarity, empathy, and cosmopolitanism. Religious sentiments are socially relevant only when it antagonizes the heightened self-interested individualism considered to have penetrated politics, society, and religion. Populist religious leaders are thus likely to be successful when discursive elements are tied together, both in equivalence (positively) and difference (negatively), around a strong Muslim collective that pivots around solidarity, empathy, and cosmopolitanism. ‘The *ummah*’ is thus the antagonizing force that undermines and challenges monetary self-interests, political influence, social polarization and intolerance that disrupts the possibility of a global *ummah*. This *ummah* does not solely constitute of Muslims but also includes non-Muslims *who are governed by ‘Islamic’ principles*.

Religious populism, in the current context of Indonesia, Pakistan and Turkey, demands a leader who can bridge the link between ‘pure’ Islamism and civilizationism, without losing facets of nationalism. This is why, we propose, religious populists lean towards the persona of authoritarian leaders and authoritarian leadership, because it ties in with formulations of the Other (as a self-interested, individualistic, and imperial hegemon) and formulations of the Enemy (as immoral, intolerant, and polarizing). The Other and the Enemy subvert the very possibility of society (one harmonious, just and fair), which Islamic values can serve to correct.

There is a pattern among interviewees that consider mainstream media to support the marginalization of Muslims globally, and as such undermine the unity of the *ummah*. This is complemented with feelings of sadness because the *ummah* is not deemed strong enough to correct false representations and significations of Islam and Muslimhood, often linked to Islamist extremism and events such as 9/11. Legacy media, as an institution, is considered responsible for *allowing* the mediatization of hegemonic politics that is inherently

49 Voice of America. (2024, January 15). *Pakistan’s PTI Barred From Using Cricket Bat Electoral Symbol*. Retrieved from <https://www.voanews.com/a/pakistan-s-pti-barred-from-using-cricket-bat-electoral-symbol-/7439552.html>.

50 Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict. (2023, October 20). *Indonesian Islamists in the Lead-Up to the 2024 Elections*. Retrieved from <https://understandingconflict.org/en/publications/IPAC-report89-Indonesian-Islamists-in-the-Lead-Up-to-the-2024-Elections-eng>.

counter-intuitive to authentic Muslimhood. It is such mediatization, that is; the ‘influence of the media on social practices’⁵¹ that populist supporters aim to confront. In other words, it is not solely the legacy media itself (the ontic dimension), but the actual role of mediatization (the ontological dimension)–as a relation–that is antagonistic. Therefore, the response to the populist attack on the media by legacy media that is focused on objective and ethical journalistic practices, for instance, are often effectively sidelined. This is because it is not the ontic dimension of the legacy media only that contributes to the antagonistic relationship, but also the very process of mediatization whereby the media institution takes the position of the ‘elite’. In a society that has a predominant populist character, a hybrid media ecology, where the old and new media logics coalesce, the different forms of media can become an antagonistic force in themselves. In other words, the hybridity of the media consists of a dialectic that is utilized and mobilized by populists who want to achieve a rupture within the established order, which in the context of the media translates to hegemonic forms of mediatization by media institutions. In this sense, populists aim to ‘fix’ mainstream media and media institutions as fulfilling a role in society that no longer adheres to the changes and demands of society, namely, to transform media systems so that it fulfils a ‘proper’ civic instead of an ‘improper’ political role.

Religious extremists act reactionary,⁵² and interviewees condemn this ‘hijacking’ of Islam that creates further divisions within societies and between Muslims. In the words of PT110: “Whatever the West does in the context of Islamophobia, it hurts all of us.” Muslim representation in mainstream (Western) media is partly responsible for the misrepresentation of Islamist thought that is neither considered radical nor extreme among Islamist populist supporters. Moreover, the signification of mainstream media in the populist discourse of interviewees indicates a specific relationship with traditional forms of media that are intertwined in existing relations of power. Unless mainstream media becomes an extension of a populist Islamist discourse, like in the case of Turkey where Erdogan has a firm grip on state media outlets, it is prone to corruption and misaligned interests. In the ecology of a hybrid mediascape, oppressed groups, like the *ummah*, even in places like Turkey

51 Šori and Ivanova 2017.

52 In this context, “reactionary” refers to the tendency of religious extremists to act in ways that resist or oppose progressive social and political changes, often seeking to restore or maintain traditional hierarchies and values, A. Mondon & A. Winter, A. (2020). *Reactionary Democracy: How Racism and the Populist Far Right Became Mainstream*. Verso Books.

where the mainstream media is tied to the AKP government, find representation in new forms of media that is uncensored, uneditorialized, and unmediated. This is, however, a specific relationship with ‘new’ and ‘old’ forms of media, and not merely a matter of representation. In that sense, we agree with Šori and Ivanova⁵³ who argue that mainstream media contribute to the empowerment of reactionary populism, through this very antagonistic relationship wherein mainstream or legacy media represent existing power structures and dynamics tied up in profit, self-interest, illegitimacy, partisanship, and false ideology.

These dynamics reflect the ontological disruption facilitated by hybrid media. Legacy media is positioned as part of the “Other,” representing corrupt, elite-controlled structures that perpetuate secular hegemony and marginalize the ummah. In contrast, social media is perceived as an extension of “the people,” providing a space for the expression of shared emotions – such as pride in Islamic identity, anger at misrepresentation, and hope for a unified ummah. This dichotomy reinforces the antagonistic logic central to civilizational populism, where the “Other” encompasses both ideological (Western hegemony, secularism) and institutional (legacy media) threats to Muslim solidarity.

The hybrid media ecology thus serves as both an ontic manifestation and an ontological mechanism of civilizational populism. Ontically, it enables specific practices, such as the use of social media platforms for mobilization and identity construction. Ontologically, it sustains the affective and ideological underpinnings of “us” versus “them” narratives by embedding these practices in a broader struggle against perceived enemies of the ummah. For example, interviewees often linked their social media engagement to a larger civilizational project, using platforms to advocate for Islamic values while denouncing secularism and foreign interference as existential threats.

The hybrid media ecology operates as a site where the contents of civilizational populism (e.g., Islamic identity, nationalist pride, cultural unity) are articulated through a populist logic of antagonism. Social media facilitates the amplification of emotions – such as fear and anger toward the “Other” and pride and hope within the ummah – thereby reinforcing the ontological premise that “the people” represent a superior civilization. Legacy media, as a component of the “Other,” is not only rejected but actively demonized, solidifying its role in the antagonistic construction of populist narratives.

By leveraging social media to bypass traditional gatekeepers, populist actors and their supporters create alternative narratives that challenge dominant power structures. However, this hybrid strategy also reveals the fluidity of the

53 Ibid.

“Other,” which can encompass both external forces (e.g., Western hegemony) and internal elements (e.g., secularist media). Understanding these dynamics provides deeper insight into how civilizational populism mobilizes support and constructs identities in the contemporary media landscape.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that hybrid media ecology allows civilisational populists to blur the roles of traditional and social media, often allowing them to employ both for distinct purposes. For example, PTI supporters in the current political context of Pakistan (where the party is out of power) disparage traditional media while amplifying its populist discourse through social media platforms. However, when it was in power (2018–2022), it relied on the same broadcast and print mediums to legitimise its claims. Similarly, AKP supporters chiefly trust traditional media while acknowledging the role of social media as a complementary tool for Islamic ideological outreach, especially amongst the youth. Moreover, and especially in the context of religious populist mobilisation, hybrid media ecology creates a conducive environment for news and ideas to transfer from one medium to another. For example, PTI’s social media campaigns quite frequently become a topic of discussion on Pakistan’s broadcast television, effectively showcasing the power of the former to set agendas on the latter. Similarly, FPI’s coverage of its ‘positive sides’ on social media compels traditional Indonesian media to engage with these narratives, even only to critique it. This dynamic emphasises the reciprocal interaction between the two media domains in a hybrid media ecosystem. Social media is a creative and disruptive setting for creating narratives, whereas traditional media is a formal platform for legitimising and reinforcing them. This dynamic is crucial for populist movements in developing the larger public discourse, combining the people-centered credibility of social media with the bureaucratic weight of traditional media.

7 Conclusion

Through 164 interviews with supporters of PTI, AKP, and FPI, we identified the ontic elements shaping the constructs of ‘the people,’ ‘the nation,’ and ‘the ummah,’ while analysing the entanglements between populism, nationalism, and civilisationism. The emotional attachments to these elements revealed affective patterns central to constructing ‘us’ and maintaining its coherence. We demonstrated how Islamist national populism and civilisational populism differ ontically, yet coexist synergistically in these contexts. This dual structure – where nationalism and civilisationism operate in tandem – contributes to the relative success of religious populisms by amplifying their appeal across multiple dimensions.

The findings highlight the ontological aspect of populism as fundamental to its societal relevance and political efficacy. Emotions play a critical role in this process, not as static elements but as fluid forces capable of extending populist discourse. For instance, the hope attached to the 'ummah' is sedimented in the civilisationist paradigm, linking historical narratives of moral leadership with aspirations for a righteous future. This hope enables populist discourse to incorporate new antagonisms while maintaining coherence. Emotions, therefore, operate ontologically to construct an 'us' that is both stable and adaptable.

Moreover, the hybrid media ecology emerges as a pivotal context for religious populism's disruptive performances. Religious populists do not merely antagonize mainstream media but also depend on it for visibility and legitimacy. This ambivalent relationship underscores a broader dialectic where mainstream and legacy media serve as both adversaries and platforms for populist mediatization. Digital media further amplifies this dynamic, enabling populists to bypass traditional gatekeepers and reinforce their antagonistic narratives. In Turkey, for example, AKP's control of state media illustrates how populists utilize mainstream media ontically, while their presence in digital spaces reflects their ontological reliance on media antagonism. PTI frames legacy media as corrupt and against the Ummah to mobilise anti-establishment sentiment while amplifying such narratives through grassroots campaigns on social media. Similarly, FPI also passively relies on its critique of mainstream media to perpetuate antagonisms between the people and the elite while multiplying such sentiments through active populist campaigns on social media. This interplay showcases how religious populists blend both traditional and social media to construct a unified logic of resistance.

This leads to the conclusion that the ontological aspect of populism is equally if not more important for populism to be socially relevant and politically successful. This is particularly evident when examining the role of emotions, and the various emotions that support attachment to discourse on various fronts. Different contents can be attached to different emotions because of the act of *extending* discourse that is at the core of populist signification. When emotions are *sedimented* into the structure of discourse, the *contents* of discourse can be extended to include other or more antagonisms. Thus, emotions can be considered to function ontologically to construct an 'us' that is both sedimented and ever-changing.

Lastly, in the spirit of this Special Issue, we have situated these civilisational populist discourses in a hybrid media ecology to emphasize that their disruptive performances are in congruence with the *demands* of the modern media environment. This relationship religious populists have with mainstream and legacy media is not a merely an antagonistic one; it is also supportive in their

mediatization. We therefore consider mainstream and legacy media both a signifier and a form of mediation that populists use to antagonize mainstream media *and* support the existence of mainstream media by their very antagonistic relationship with them. The ontic/ontological lens can help with uncovering the dialectic of mediated populism and the conceptualizing of mediation in religious populist discourse.

Further exploration of this dialectic could deepen our understanding of how religious populism adapts to evolving media ecologies and sustains its affective and ideological resonance in diverse political contexts.

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