

## Understanding the New Islamic Populism: Al-Mukmin Ngruki Islamic Boarding School

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### **Abstract**

The emergence of mobilised mass movements, demanding prosperity and the elimination of injustice, has emerged in various parts of the world, without exception in the Middle East and Indonesia. This movement was dominated by educated middle-class youth, sparked the term ummah, and then formed unique solidarity to protest against the government of his country. A new concept is needed by paying attention to the novelty of these characteristics, considering the old populism concept is not relevant enough to explain it. This paper seeks to raise the concept of New Islamic Populism to answer this deficiency. Furthermore, the Al-Mukmin Ngruki Islamic Boarding School (PPIM), the Islamic boarding school often associated with terrorism, is used as the object of research to show the evolution of populism. This study uses qualitative methods and data collection techniques in the form of interviews and literature studies. This study found that both santri and ustaz PPIM have aspirations and characteristics, as shown by the New Islamic Populism movement.

**Keywords:** populism, New Islamic Populism, Al-Mukmin Ngruki Islamic Boarding School

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## **Introduction**

Populism, mass movements that are massively mobilised (Hadiz, 2019), is now happening in many countries around the world, including the Middle East, which is predominantly Muslim. They make significant challenges to the economic and political systems in their countries (Dorraj, 2017). In Turkey, for example, under an organised force such as the Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi (AKP), in November 2002, by utilising the support of a large mass base, this party succeeded in gaining leadership in the government by narrating the people (in this context Muslims) who were oppressed by the anti-Islamic regime, and the incompetent governance carried out by the Kemalist regime which is considered corrupt and disgusting. In the same region, this also happened in Iran under Khomeini and Egypt under the Muslim Brotherhood against Hosni Mubarak (Filc, 2019).

Furthermore, by observing other areas, this mass mobilisation of Muslims also occurred in Indonesia. The movements that consistently voiced economic justice succeeded in attracting the attention of the wider community, especially the use of the ummah narrative as a form of solidarity in numerous political movements. Not only that, but interestingly, by comparing it with the three countries above and Indonesia, it can also be seen that the majority of the movement's participants were dominated by the urban middle class who, at a glance, have received higher education; in turn, they even have become the most influential actor for leading this action (Hadiz, 2019). It is really interesting to compare these characteristics with the previous populist movement because there has been a significant shift. So it will not be surprising if the turmoil that occurred in several Middle Eastern countries and Indonesia will hereafter be referred to as New Islamic populism in the political science discourse (Hadiz, 2018).

The existence of novelty in this populist movement begs for a deeper understanding to provide a complete picture of the actors involved in it, especially in the Indonesian context. In this study, the Al-Mukmin Ngruki Islamic Boarding School (PPIM) is used as a case study of New Islamic populism, which this article argues to be more relevant to the Indonesian context. Not only to research New Islamic Populism from grassroots movements which is often a

forgotten subject, PPIM itself has a high significance in Indonesian Islamic politics, considering that this institution has produced a solid and significant terrorist network in Southeast Asia (International Crisis Group, 2002). Moreover, PPIM is also one of the main legacies of Darul Islam, a Muslim-based organisation that massively rebelled at the beginning of Indonesia's independence and continues to give birth to new embryos of its movement in Islamic politics in Indonesia in the future (Bruinessen, 2002).

### **Methods**

This study utilises a qualitative method, using descriptive data. The authors examine primary data from in-depth interviews conducted with several actors in PPIM to get their authentic views. The informants were selected based on purposive sampling. According to Sugiyono (2018), purposive sampling is a method of determining research samples by looking at specific considerations of the subject and object of research, which aims to make the data obtained later more representative. Accordingly, santri and ustaz who have crucial position in PPIM were interviewed because they were considered by the author to have extensive knowledge of the inner social dynamics of PPIM. These interviews were conducted with unstructured questions in order to obtain natural and interactive answers from the informants and to allow a broader and deeper exploration of the object under study (Sugiyono, 2010). The authors also took into account various written sources such as news, journal articles, and books to obtain secondary data.

### **Results and Discussion**

#### *Rethinking the Concept of Populism*

In its historical range, it is undeniable that the tradition of research on populism used to pay almost exclusive attention to the Latin American and, more recently, to the North American and European regions (Kusumo and Hurriyah, 2018). Meanwhile, studies of populism in Southeast Asia are lacking and have only recently surfaced, for example, in Thailand during the Thaksin Shinawatra era (Phongpaichit and Baker, 2008), the Philippines during the Estrada era (Hedman 2001) and Duterte (Arguelles, 2019), and post-reform Indonesia (Hadiz 2019; Hamid 2014; Mietzner 2015; Okamoto 2009; Ziv 2001). Interestingly, the contemporary populism in Indonesia,

as well as in several countries in the Middle East, such as Egypt and Turkey, shows a unique characteristic and deserves further analysis.

Compared to contemporary populist leaders such as Duterte in the Philippines or Trump in the United States, populist movements that occur in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, have experienced a thick evolution in terms of their purposes, although unfortunately, these movements have been somewhat overlooked in the political intellectual discourse. The main characters that distinguish the old populism from contemporary populism that is the purpose to decolonise (de la Torre, 2018).

Since the Global South had been gripped by colonial powers for too long, local populist leaders mobilised the general public to resist those colonial powers. Moreover, still in the decolonisation trajectory, populism was also used to solidify a society within a country by defining who is friend and foe, both on a national and international scale. In the case of Indonesia, this practice was carried out by Soekarno by creating the controversial slogans of Nationalism, Communism, Religion (Kusumo and Hurriyah, 2018). In other regions, for example, in Africa, as shown by Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt, populism emerged as a movement to reject British colonialism as well as to build alliances with developing countries (Dorraj, 2017). In a socialist narrative frame, apart from fighting against the grip of the colonial state, Nasser also wanted to get rid of the Egyptian feudal system and its corrupt aristocracy by means of modernisation. He represented himself as a leader of the oppressed workers and the general public (Abdel-Fadil, 1980).

In contrast to old populism, new populism, as is usually associated with massive social movements in the Middle East and several countries in Southeast Asia and Latin America, focuses mainly on the demands of improving the domestic economy, which is stumbling in the competition of the global neoliberal economic system (Hadiz, 2019). At first glance, this may have similar characteristics to that which occurred in Latin America, especially the Peron era in Argentina, Vargas in Brazil, and Cardenas in Mexico (Grigera, 2017). However, it should be noted that the three leaders above stood in a different global context from the populist movements

currently occurring in the Middle East and Southeast Asia. In Latin America in the early 20th century, populists led mass movements against corrupt local governments in economies that were not yet globalised at the current level. By contrast, it can be said that the new neoliberal economy emerged strongly after the Cold War and democracy was increasingly firmly embraced by countries in the world (see Fukuyama, 1992). Therefore, other writers such as Grigera (2017) prefer to call the evolution of populism in contemporary Latin America 'neopopulism', where neoliberal economics is more firmly rooted, as exemplified by Carlos Menem in Argentina and Alan Garcia or Alberto Fujimori in Peru.

Furthermore, research projects on populism often miss its relation to religion. In Indonesia, Egypt, Turkey, and other Muslim-majority countries, the Islamic narrative always resonates in every mobilised mass action. To accommodate Islam as a driving force in many populist movements, Hadiz (2019) then formulates the concept of New Islamic Populism with a political-economic approach. Vedi Hadiz's work is a phenomenal breakthrough in populism studies because it incorporates new attributes in understanding Islamic politics in Indonesia – a series of phenomena which too often go unnoticed (Moffit, 2014) – which has been too long dominated by Geertz's approach since the 1960s (Hadiz, 2019).

Furthermore, the most famous research on religion and its relation to mass movements is that of liberation theology in Latin America (Klaiber 1989). Even then, compared to the phenomenon of populism in Indonesia and other Middle Eastern countries, it cannot be applied. The definition of populism that has been built in Europe and North America is still not complex enough to capture similar phenomena elsewhere (Kusumo and Hurriyah, 2018). This could be because populism itself does not have a universal conceptualisation and is always debated (Campos-Herrera and De Reguero 2019; Hadiz 2019; Mudde 2015). Even so, this should not discourage efforts to continue to formulate populism which is at least suitable to explain a phenomenon that continues to evolve, and in this study is Indonesia and other Muslim-majority countries (Hadiz, 2019).

What needs to be underlined is that populism does not recog-

nise a definite ideological position from within the movement itself (Hadiz 2019; Mudde 2015). In Europe, for example, populist movements initiated by right-wing parties seek the abolishment of open immigration policy towards those coming from the Middle East and North Africa. Even to some degree, as demonstrated by Fortuyn and Wilders in the Netherlands, this type of populism exhibits inherent xenophobia (Vossen, 2010). In Latin America at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, on the other hand, the populist movement was actually initiated by the Left movement to fight the increasingly failing government in the wheels of global capitalism and ultimately disturbing the economic situation of the people as shown by Hugo Chavez in Venezuela. The social justice narrative was inherent in the populist movements (Hawkins, 2003). This fact shows that populism metamorphoses depending on the structure in which it is located (Canovan, 1999). In relation to the New Islamic populism, which will be discussed later in this paper, Islam means that it is not the main inspiration for the populism movement; instead, it is the cultural capital used by populists to remain solidly united (Hadiz, 2019).

*Old Islamic Populism, New Islamic Populism, and Their Characteristics*  
New Islamic populism, like contemporary populism described above, was born in the context of neoliberal globalisation and democracy that promises prosperity and development (Hadiz, 2018). Like other forms of populism, it will emerge as a reaction to the disappointment of a particular class or segment of society with the existing situation. In New Islamic populism, the disappointment that arises is the result of dissatisfaction and disappointment with the promises of democracy and neoliberal globalisation related to development which in fact have not been appropriately realised (Hadiz, 2013). In Indonesia itself, Islamic populism also arises because of the enormous economic disparity between the ummah and the non-ummah segments of society. This inequality could be due to differences in access to state resources that have long been controlled by certain elites.

Of course, New Islamic Populism has significant differences with previous Islamic populism, for example, with Sarekat Islam in Indonesia in the early 20th century. Especially by paying attention

to the posture of this movement, it is clear that the urban middle class has dominated the configuration of New Islamic populism that is widespread in various Muslim countries in the world. This is quite different from the populist ideology used by Sarekat Islam which took the mantle of resistance from economic inequality due to the Dutch policy of relegating the *pribumi* (native people) to the bottom of the social and economic ladder. The massive expansion of Chinese traders over the *pribumi*'s main products, such as batik, was the trigger for the emergence of the Sarekat Dagang Islam, the forerunner to the formation of the Sarekat Islam. This organisation also initially moved to improve the economy of Muslims, who at that time was very cornered, and was initiated by the urban petty bourgeoisies and the rural elites (Hadiz, 2019). HOS Tjokroaminoto, a well-known figure from this organisation, often talked about the economic injustice experienced by the *pribumi* and always tried to combine Islam and Socialism to answer the poverty of Muslims (Kuntowijoyo, 2018).

It must be understood that in New Islamic Populism, the urban middle class is lumpen of intelligence that is dissatisfied with the state of its own country in the context of development. They find themselves in conditions that fall short of their expectations after a gruelling higher education. Followers of Hasan Al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb, early thinkers of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Muslim activists who were involved in mass Muslim mobilisations throughout 2016 and 2017, and AKP manoeuvres in Turkey in the early 2000s mainly involve the Muslim youth from a higher and even secular education background (Hadiz, 2019). Their narratives also have the same pattern: demanding welfare that they do not experience.

Even so, the populism movement is actually filled with various social classes. For example, Vedi Hadiz, as the main pioneer of the New Islamic Populism concept, sees the posture of populism in Indonesia as containing different social classes, which may include the lower class and the new urban middle class. The mixture of various classes is what he calls "asymmetrical class alliances" (Hadiz, 2018). It must be noted that, although the sociological composition of populism is a mixture of various social classes, the New Islamic Populism movement was dominated by Muslim youth who gained a

higher education. In Indonesia, the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) is evidence of this thesis, namely a party filled with urban lumpen-intelligentsia which leads the populist movement as reflected in the various Aksi Bela Islam movements by the National Movement for Defending the Fatwa of the Indonesian Ulema Council (GNPF-MUI) during 2016-2017 which is also filled with the urban poor, for example, members of the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), as well as the petty bourgeoisies (see Kusumo & Hurriyah, 2018).

Furthermore, the next thing that needs to be understood is how the asymmetrical alliance can be established. If language like the term “the people” can unite social factions into one part of the populist movement as Laclau has argued, in Islamic populism, all existing cultural resources, including religion, are utilised as a bridge across social divides (Hadiz 2019). This is also a significant difference between conventional populism and Islamic populism, both old and new styles. In its various journeys, conventional populism has a virtuous narrative of the people against an immoral and corrupt elite (see Laclau, 2005). In Islamic populism, both old and new, it should be emphasised that the term the people has changed to *the ummah*, a concept of Muslim solidarity which is taken from the Islamic tradition itself. For this reason, the terminology of the ummah always flares up wherever an Islamic political movement occurs, including a term that terrorists often use to justify their actions.

By its nature, Hadiz (2019), by using a political-economic approach, finds that the Islamic populist movement itself basically will not leave the territory of a nation-state—Islamic populism will always operate in a nation-state concept. This is not like the descriptions of contemporary Islamic political thoughts that argue that Islamic political movements, including terrorism and populism, will form a robust global network of Islamic empires (e.g. Zuhdi & Hayatullah, 2020). It may look so at first glance, but in the end, the Islamic political movement itself still has a nationalist ego. Matsunaga (2009) comprehensively analyses the Constitution of the Republic of Iran after the revolution. He found that there was no firm conception to separate Iran from the nation’s long history. Furthermore, the moral strength of the “Islamic nation of Iran” is pre-

cisely the terminology that cannot be separated from the document. This is also shown by the AKP in Turkey, which shows signs of the ideals of neo-Ottoman Turkey by exploring the long history of the Ottoman Caliphate regarding its leadership in Central Asia and the Balkans. The AKP believes that Turkey inherited the Ottoman Caliphate and is a historical decree (Gocek, 2011). Likewise, in Indonesia, Kartosuwiryo believes that the struggle by the Indonesian people to get out of foreign imperialism is an obligation of religion. This indirectly shows that Kartosuwiryo understands that religious resources support independence in Indonesia within the territory of the nation-state (Noer, 1963).

The Islamic populism movement is also not necessarily resistant to democracy. In this case, Hadiz (2019) argues that the disapproval and acceptance of democracy by Islamic populism depends on the social position of those who are struggling in the economic, social, and political fields. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood used democracy to overthrow the authoritarian Mubarak regime, and parties using Islamic symbols emerged after the 1998 reform in Indonesia or after the collapse of the Suharto regime. Especially in Indonesia, the desire of Islamic populism to dominate the post-reform regime tends to be carried out by elites from the opportunistic middle class who were previously incubated by the Indonesian Muslim Intellectuals Association (ICMI). Another figure that can be used as an example is Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) which still argues against democracy as a state system. But on the other hand, NU and Muhammadiyah tend to accept democracy, and even NU has a long history in Democratic politics since the 1950s. In terms of the case of rejection of democracy, it is understandable because HTI does not have a strong social base like NU or Muhammadiyah, so these organisations launch displeasure with democracy (Muhtadi, 2009). A similar example occurred in authoritarian Syria. With the condition of an insignificant social base, as well as strong pressure from the Bashar Al-Asad regime, the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria is only possible to move through violence instead of elections that require strong sociological strength (Hadiz, 2019).

The flexibility of Islamic populism can be seen from the various political expressions that are different in each country in the

world. The social and economic conditions of populist actors will determine attitudes towards the domestic political system in which they are located. So, to understand populism, the key to the first analysis is to look at the social basis of populism itself and how they relate to the existing power structure (Hadiz, 2019). In the next sub-chapter, this research provides an overview of the New Islamic Populism and the Al-Mukmin Ngruki Islamic Boarding School, one of the Islamic boarding schools that can be said as under scrutiny for its activities, which will be used as an example. By paying more attention to the narrative of the *ummah*, the characteristics of aspirations regarding welfare and justice, as well as the flexibility of attitudes towards democracy in Indonesia, the concept of new Islamic populism is very much in line with the existing reality.

*Al-Mukmin Ngruki Islamic Boarding School: An Overview*

The emergence of the Al-Mukmin Ngruki Islamic Boarding School could not be separated from the history of Darul Islam which was had been led by Kartosuwiryo (International Crisis Group, 2002). The defeat of Darul Islam at that time did not result in its complete demise. Darul Islam evolved into Jamaah Islamiyah, which was founded by Abdullah Sungkar and Abu Bakar Baasyir, who had been members of Masjumi in the past. These two men are also the figures who founded PPIM, which was started in 1972 in Grogol and moved to Cemani, Ngruki, in 1974. The establishment of this boarding school could not be separated from the intervention of Mohammad Natsir, who at that time chaired the Indonesian Islamic Da'wah Council (DDII). Thus, the emergence of this Islamic boarding school is part of the legacy of Darul Islam, which was crushed in the 1960s (Sholahudin, 2011).

PPIM is often regarded as the central pillar of the puritan movement in Solo (Murtadho, 2017). Nevertheless, what is rarely known is that this Islamic boarding school was located in the area where the Indonesian Communist Party was based in the Solo area at the beginning of its establishment. One of the goals of establishing this Islamic boarding school is to "re-Islamise" people who had been exposed to communism. This fact is undoubtedly in line with the long journey of Darul Islam after its defeat which then made this organisation focus on other endeavours. As Sholahudin (2011)

explained, members of Darul Islam were used by the New Order to eradicate the remnants of the communist movement in various parts of Indonesia. It is also explained that PPIM was a minority ideology around its current territory in the past. So, it is not surprising that this Islamic boarding school encountered difficulties in carrying out its actions at that time. Currently, PPIM has a relatively strong influence on the surrounding areas, as has been well explained by Najib (2013).

Although it had been used to eradicate the remnants of communism in the dense interior of Central Java, the remnants of Darul Islam were later betrayed by the New Order because it was considered capable of becoming a major opposition movement. In fact, many Darul Islam activists were politically imprisoned by the New Order without apparent wrongdoing. Ustaz Wahyudin of the Al-Mukmin Ngruki Boarding School was imprisoned on unclear charges related to Warman's terror acts, who funded himself through a series of robberies. He admitted that Komando Jihad, which became a solid opposition to the New Order, was basically a formation of Ali Moertopo and was used to eradicate hardliners (International Crisis Group, 2002). The position of the remnants of the Darul Islam movement, which had a military background, continued to be heavily cornered until the end of the New Order. Therefore, it is not surprising that many para-military organisations were formed in Solo and other areas (Hadiz, 2019).

PPIM's popularity rose significantly after the Bali Bombing tragedy and various other terrorist events of which alumni of the boarding school were part (Murtadho, 2017). To name a few are Mohamed Ihsan, who was involved in the 2000 Christmas Eve bombings in Pekanbaru and the 2003 Marriott Hotel bombings, Toni Togar, who graduated from Ngruki in 1990 and was involved in the Christmas Eve bombings in 2000 (Satriawan, 2012), and Mubarok and Ali Ghufron, the two brothers who were the main perpetrators of the 2002 Bali Bombings (Mubarak, 2015).

*PPIM Santri and Ustaz as New Islamic Populism: Mobilisation into Aksi Bela Islam*

Vedi Hadiz fully refers to Laclau's idea of the shift from the pleb to

the populus, namely the time when solidarity among different social factions can be formed in the same identity as the word 'the people' (Hadiz, 2019). In New Islamic Populism, as described above, the term 'people' is replaced by the word 'ummah'. The populist movement, which consists of various types of layers of society, can be of the same mind and have an interest in fighting against the elite, which they consider to be corrupt and unfair.

In Indonesia itself, one of the Islamic populist movements that are often researched is the Aksi Bela Islam movement by the GNPF-MUI in 2016-2017 – hereinafter called the Aksi Bela Islam (ABI) in Jakarta. Although several times this phenomenon is said to be inappropriate as a representation of Islamic populism as stated by Kusumo & Hurriyah (2018) and Jayanto (2019), ABI remains a solid monument to Islamic politics in Indonesia because this action created an alumni organisation called the Persaudaraan Alumni (Alumni Brotherhood) 212 – hereinafter the PA 212 – which is well-structured and consistently able to formulate actions to defend its interests throughout 2019, including the rejection of the results of the presidential election on 22 May 2019 in front of the General Elections Commission (KPU) Building in Jakarta. The narrative that was issued was about the ummah being oppressed and controlled by an oligarchic elite who was vying for power (Hadiz and Robison, 2017).

Apart from various doubts about the solidarity of ABI, this movement has united various social strata of society into a common identity, namely the ummah. The shared identity produces a sense of the common fate of being oppressed by the government elite, even though each social stratum has different interests and degrees of oppression. During this movement, PPIM sent santri and several ustaz to join the 212 demonstration. The school was even willing to rent several buses for its santri and ustaz to go to Jakarta and join the action. In an interview with Ferry Ari Wibowo, the Chairman of *Imarah Syu'unith Tholabab* (IST), he said that this movement was a form of defending the ummah from the arbitrariness of the Indonesian government, which was "too protective of Ahok" and therefore made Muslims "weakened". From the interviews that have been conducted, it is also known that the PPIM santri take a dislike

to Ahok so much that according to Fery, Ahok even “deserves to be killed” because he has tarnished the religion of Islam. Not only that, it is also perceived that the unjust government has carried out oppression while protecting the former governor of DKI Jakarta.

As is well known, basically, ABI was not only carried out by one element of society. PKS, with an urban middle-class social base, had a significant role in this action. In addition, FPI with a social base of the urban marginal poor also had an important role. With other interests, such as defeating Basuki Tjahaja Purnama in the 2017 DKI Jakarta Pilkada, PKS, Gerindra, and FPI called loudly for strict sentences for the accusation of blasphemy against the Qur’an. On the side-lines of the demonstration, the narrative to return to the Jakarta Charter resonated strongly to end injustice against the ummah (Hadiz 2018; Saputra 2017). Muhammad Rizieq Shihab, FPI’s Great Imam, at the 212 alumni reunion in December 2017, for example, called for a sharia-compliant NKRI. During his speech, he appealed to his fellow Muslims to bring into realisation a more welcome environment for *pribumi* in their own country and end to *riba*, corruption, gambling, drugs, pornography, prostitution, LGBT, lies, slander, and tyranny.

By looking at the discourse described above, it appears that the PPIM santri and ustaz have a close inclination with New Islamic populism. They joined the mass action, which according to Vedi Hadiz’s lexicon, there is a “suspension of difference” between the santri and the ustaz with a sociological background from this Islamic boarding school and other social factions who were members of the ABI movement throughout 2016 until 2017 (see Hadiz, 2018). The oppressed ummah made them willing to go all the way from Solo to Jakarta to undergo a demonstration for justice for them. With PKS as the central actor in various ABI movements, santri and ustaz from PPIM joined and demonstrated.

There is no denying that the New Islamic populism movement continues in Indonesia. PKS, as part of the lumpen-intelligence movement of this movement, even continues to experience an increase in electability from time to time (Damhuri 2021; Sulistiyono 2020). This also happened to Rizieq Shihab. According to the

Indonesia Elections and Strategic (indEX) survey in November 2020, Rizieq Shihab had an electability rate of almost 10%, rivaling Prabowo Subianto and Ganjar Pranowo (Mirsan, 2020). Burhanuddin Muhtadi, Executive Director of Indonesian Political Indicators, even called the FPI Grand Imam a “King Maker” in Indonesian politics—whoever is Indonesia’s presidential candidate in 2024, if you want to get a conservative Muslim vote (in this case, the layers of society who are members of in the New Islamic Populism movement), you must go through the “blessing” of Habib Rizieq (Amir, 2020)

Habib Rizieq’s increasingly strong position in national politics, on the other hand, indicates that the power of New Islamic populism in Indonesia has evolved into a more giant wave. After spending more than three years in Saudi Arabia, Habib Rizieq was picked up at Soekarno Hatta airport by his followers in a considerable number which caused chaos. For some analysts, the sheer display of mass turnout was deliberately done to show that the New Islamic populism movement still exists and even strengthens despite its defeat in the presidential election in 2019. Not only that, with the distinctive style of New Islamic populism, FPI later stated that Indonesia was in an “extraordinary crisis”; therefore, the *ummah* must “rise and retake their pride”, and Habib Rizieq shall “lead the revolution” (Amindoni, 2020)

#### *Aspirations for Prosperity and Freedom from Oppression*

At the Al-Mukmin Ngruki Islamic Boarding School, the narrative of oppression and the experience of people’s injustice is significantly amplified. Rif’an Ubaidillah, a senior at PPIM, firmly said that Muslims in Indonesia are experiencing severe injustice. When the author asked, “are you proud or satisfied with the Indonesian government?”, Rif’an straightforwardly answered that they (santri) could be proud of this government as long as the Indonesian government “works properly”. This statement illustrates their great disappointment with the government, which has done injustice to the *ummah*. He also explained that the current condition of Muslims is being cornered, and the government seems to be silent or even has a role in the oppression. In a similar vein, Ustaz Muhson, the Head of Public Relations Department of PPIM, also expressed his wish that Muslims not be harmed by the government. He even explained that the

Ngruki Islamic Boarding School recommended its santri from DKI Jakarta to return home and cast their votes during the 2017 Pilkada. This decision encouraged santri to return home so that “the elected [Governor of DKI Jakarta] does not harm Muslims”.

Historically, in the political context, PPIM has always been a part of Islamic politics, which has been cornered at least since the New Order. Many PPIM clerics were imprisoned during the New Order for unclear reasons (Hadiz, 2019). Suharto’s repression gripped the foundations of Islamic politics that remained from the disbandment of Darul Islam, which was then used to eradicate the remnants of the communist movement, including PPIM itself, which was the purge of the communist movement in Solo. For Ustaz Muhson, the marginalisation of PPIM after the reform no longer manifests physically but through the Indonesian (Muharom, 2015) and Western (Wijaya, 2010) mass media, which always portray them within a negative light. Thanks to such a portrayal, there has been a consistent decline in new student enrolments to PPIM on an annual basis.

Within their personal views, they deny that radicalism grows in a structured way by this institution. In line with that, Noor (2007), for example, analyses the PPIM curriculum and does not find any direct lead towards terrorism mainly because the PPIM curriculum itself adheres to the standards of the Ministry of Education and Culture and the Ministry of Religious Affairs since the 1980s (Murtadho 2017; see also Sumadinata, Sulaeman, and Yulianti 2020). Furthermore, according to Ustaz Muhson, if there are PPIM alumni who become terrorists, studies that try to understand this phenomenon by examining PPIM always “exaggerate” and “do not match the facts here”. This also entices the boarding school leadership to reject media coverage and research on PPIM. There is even an anecdote that develops among ustaz and santri that their moves are always “known to the CIA” (see Noor, 2007).

In the context of the economy, the aspirations of PPIM santri have deep reasons to exist. As is well known, the majority of santri studying at PPIM come from cities across Central Java, especially around Solo, which is not yet very developed. Ferry Ari Wibowo,

who is an informant for this research, for example, is from Karanganyar, a relatively underdeveloped city with a high poverty rate in Central Java (Wardoyo, 2019). The monthly tuition fee at PPIM indicates that the santri have lower-middle-class backgrounds. This also means that they have backgrounds that are very vulnerable to falling into poverty (World Bank, 2019). Ustaz Muhson explained that the majority of PPIM santri's family backgrounds are small-scale traders and employees, as are Ferry Ari Wibowo's parents. It is not surprising that the facilities offered by this Islamic boarding school are not as good as other modern Islamic boarding schools in Solo, such as Assalaam, which is filled with santri from upper-middle-class backgrounds. It can be concluded that the sociological background of the santri of PPIM is lower-middle-class people who are urbanised to Solo, a relatively developed industrial city in Central Java.

Unfortunately, the prosperity promised by neoliberal globalisation to these people has not been realised and has worsened their economy. After the 1998 reform, when Indonesia began to enter a new phase of democratisation and was firmly integrated with neoliberal globalisation, social inequality in Indonesia continued to rise, as measured by the Gini index (Hadiz, 2021). Moreover, data taken in 2010 shows that the average Average Net Worth of the 40 wealthiest people in Indonesia is 630,000 times the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) income per capita of the people in this country. Even though the number of rich people is only less than two people for one million of the population, all of their assets combined are equivalent to 10% of Indonesia's GDP. This is especially troubling because material resources have a very significant influence on Indonesia's national politics (see Winters, 2013) and foreign policy (Al-Fadhat, 2019).

Furthermore, it is undeniable that the majority of the oligarchy is filled with people of Chinese ethnicity who do not hold Islam as their religion. These oligarchs grew their fortune significantly after being co-opted by the Suharto regime as business partners and supporters of the New Order; in turn, they continue to rule the Indonesian economy despite reforms (Chua, 2008). Because they are not Muslims, these oligarchs are not included in the terminology of the *ummah*, and Islamic populism cannot but take a dislike

to them. The fact that Liem Sioe Liong, a tycoon who had a special relationship with the Suharto government, became the target of *ummah* confrontation can explain the collective resentment (Hadiz, 2013). Therefore, throughout 2016-2017, the slogan “anti-asing” and “anti-aseng” was found in the ABI movements. “Anti-asing” refers to the movement’s aspirations for the control of Indonesia’s natural resources, which they think that foreigners are dominating while the *ummah* is considered unprofitable. “Anti-aseng” refers to the rejection of Indonesia’s economic ties with China, which is considered communist; it also symbolises the resentment at the ethnic Chinese oligarchs of Indonesian nationality whose economic position is far above the *ummah*. In a Reuters interview with Bachtiar Nasir, General Chair of the GNPF MUI, he said that ethnic Chinese currently control the majority of Indonesia’s wealth, even though their number is only 5% of the total population of Indonesia. He also said that this ethnic sentiment could not be denied because it is related to economic inequality (Allard and Da Costa, 2017). Still, in the same trajectory, the ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute survey in 2017 finds that nearly 60% of Indonesian “indigenous” believe that ethnic Chinese are wealthier than they are (Setijadi, 2017).

The fact that the urban middle class is mostly unemployed is also a trigger for New Islamic populism. The higher education they have strived for does not translate into a reality promised by globalisation. According to BPS, Indonesia’s hidden unemployment rate is in 2013 at 33 per cent despite it being at six per cent (Tadjoeddin 2014). Furthermore, based on BPS’s data in 2018, 50.39 per cent of the total youth aged 15 to 29 years old are unemployed (Rahadian, 2019), which incidentally has a better quality of education than the previous generation. This fact shows that youth unemployment in Indonesia is reaching a very high rate. Habibi & Juliawan (2018) argue that a large number of the workforce in Indonesia is a “peripheral capitalist country” in which the youth have become informal workers who are vulnerable to exploitation marked by a lack of fundamental rights of workers in terms of remuneration, representation, and social protection. This condition is the fertile ground for New Islamic populism (Hadiz 2019).

With the spirit of welfare creation and oppression abolish-

ment, the New Islamic populist movement will continue to emerge. In the most recent case, it is perfectly reflected when FPI, PA 212, and GNPF Ulama, who are members of the Anti-Communist National Alliance (ANAK), held a violent demonstration against the Omnibus Law on Job Creation in Indonesia after a consultation period with PKS (Ihsanuddin, 2020). Under the pretext of attracting foreign investment, the Omnibus Law experienced rejection from various groups because it is assumed to benefit only a group of oligarchs, harm the lower class, and damage the environment (Herdaru 2020; Nurfaizah 2020). Salman Al-Farizi, the representative of FPI Jakarta, expressed ANAK's opinion that the Omnibus Law is very detrimental to Muslims in particular and the Indonesian people in general. The Omnibus Law would only result in "injustice in our midst", and of course, "Muslims will not allow injustice" (Sidik, 2020).

*The Aspiration of a Just and Beneficial Islamic State and the Flexibility towards Democracy*

The aspiration to establish an Islamic state cannot be separated from the broad context of Islamic political history. The narrative of returning to the Jakarta Charter, for example, is often amplified in the demonstrations carried out by Muslims. The rationales include establishing an ideal state and providing an assured justice and privileges for those who have been oppressed for a long time (Hadiz, 2019).

The establishment of an Islamic state seems to be the goal for the Islamic populist movement to resolve the oppression they feel. This aspiration was voiced by the santri of the Al-Mukmin Ngruki Islamic Boarding School. Fery Ari Wibowo and Rif'an Ubaidillah explained that they love Indonesia as their homeland but do not like the government or the system that regulates it. Ustaz Muhson also expressed a similar sentiment; he wanted a system of government that is based on Islam, taking the form of a caliphate. Instead of being prosperous and just, the government system in Indonesia, according to them, is actually detrimental to Muslims, as well as because this system allows for acute moral degradation. Interestingly, during that intense conversation, neither the santri nor the ustaz did not wish for the establishment of an Islamic transnational network. Indeed, they occasionally mentioned the concept of a

caliphate but in a vague explanation. Their main focus was on the “*ummah* prosperity” in Indonesia. In fact, Ustaz Muhson said that “nationalism is important”. Those explanations are in line with one of the characteristics of Islamic populism, which is indeed focused on fighting within the territory of a country. Instead of wanting to make a movement to create an Islamic empire, they want prosperity in a smaller territory, namely the nation-state.

Furthermore, New Islamic populism itself does not automatically reject democracy. This depends on the socio-political constellation. Some New Islamic populists actually favour democracy for certain reasons, as in Turkey by the AKP Party and Egypt under the Muslim Brotherhood as explained by Hamid (2014), see also Grigoriadis (2007). In Indonesia, there are differences in the acceptance of democracy as reflected by PKS, which accepts this system. At the same time, para-military organisations, such as FPI, Hezbollah, and Jundullah in Solo, clearly reject it (Hadiz, 2019). Organisations such as the FPI and other para-militaries, including terrorist groups, strongly reject the democratic system because it lays significant constraints for them to achieve the goal of establishing an Islamic state. They realise that they have a weak social base and weak financial support to navigate democracy in Indonesia which is expensive (Hadiz, 2019; Muhtadi, 2019). Nevertheless, this does not rule out the possibility that these non-electoral movements reject democracy as a whole, such as a willingness to participate in general elections.

The key to New Islamic populism is the flexibility of its attitude to achieve its goals, including navigating democracy (Hadiz 2019). Such is the response expressed by PPIM santri. They do not reject the implementation of democracy if their welfare is met while still making plans to establish an Islamic state if prosperity is not achieved. The ustaz repeated their sentiment. Both the ustaz and the santri were encouraged to exercise their right to vote in general elections. The parties they choose need to be Islamic parties that they consider capable of carrying their aspirations, such as PKS, the National Mandate Party (PAN), and also the United Development Party (PPP). The flexibility of the attitude of the santri and ustaz seems to be strongly influenced by the Jamaah Ansharut Tauhid (JAT), an organisation in which many influential PPIM ustaz organ-

ise. JAT maintains that the path of violence to create an Islamic state is not effective, so this organisation prioritises da'wah in achieving the ideals of establishing an Islamic state. Ustaz Muhson added that ustaz and santri are still encouraged to take part in the general election because they consider the "*maslahat* and *madhorot* principles". It shows that the logic of pragmatism is, in fact, more dominant than the ideological desire to establish an Islamic state. In other words, acceptance of democracy is not difficult if resources are allocated to the *ummah*.

The flexible attitude of the New Islamic Populism that is compatible with all these conditions is also reflected by FPI and other marginalised Muslim organisations. FPI Great Imam Rizieq Shihab, on various occasions, has clearly rejected democracy and wants to prioritise deliberation. This rejection of democracy is based on the consideration that there is no "participation in decision making", in this case, the *ummah*, which means that it will be harmed later (Syukron, 2018). As explained earlier, this, is of course, based on the fact the FPI mass is small, and this organisation does not have sufficient capital to navigate Indonesia's democracy which is too expensive due to money politics (Muhtadi, 2019) and is controlled by the oligarchs (Hadiz and Robison, 2013). Therefore, if it still refers to democracy, the voices of the *ummah* will not be heard, so that it becomes an "illegitimate state". Although it seems so resistant to democracy, in fact, FPI is very active in Indonesian political contestation, at least it is obvious and influential in the 2017 Jakarta Pilkada, the 2014 Presidential Election, and the 2019 Presidential Election. In the 2019 presidential election, FPI supported the Prabowo-Sandi ticket for one reason: this ticket was believed to "defend the religion [*ummah*], nation and state" (Mumpuni, 2019) So, in this context, the flexibility of the New Islamic populism is apparent, especially with the aim of protecting the *ummah*.

As reflected in PPIM santri and ustaz, who did not aspire for an Islamic empire network as a solution to the oppression of the *ummah*, FPI also had the same attitude. This is reflected when Rizieq Shihab wrote in his thesis entitled "The Effect of Pancasila on the Implementation of Islamic Sharia in Indonesia" when he was pursuing postgraduate education in Islamic Studies, Universitas An-

tar Bangsa, Malaysia. In this work, Rizieq Shihab does not mention the desire to establish a transnational Islamic state at all. After all, after his return from Saudi Arabia, Rizieq Shihab actually launched a Moral Revolution to “save NKRI” (Irawan and Umam 2020). With the same trajectory, on the 21st FPI Anniversary in 2019, Rizieq Shihab gave a long lecture via video conference and said that “only Sharia is able to protect the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia and Pancasila” (Gunadha and Saleh, 2019). During the event, Rizieq Shihab underlined that there had been a betrayal in the fifth principle of Pancasila, which is about social justice. According to him, the “cheat and tyrannical regime” has sold state assets to “asing and aseng”, which has made this country even more “bankrupt” and “downhill” (Viva, 2019). These statements further strengthen Vedi Hadiz’s New Islamic populism thesis, which states that the struggle of the Islamic populism movement will not go beyond the concept of the nation-state, and aspirations regarding injustice, especially in the economic context, are also being stirred up at the same time.

### *Rejecting the Narrative*

PPIM is often accused of being a fertile field for producing an intolerant generation (Bruinessen 2002; Istman 2017). This is inseparable from several alumni from this place who have been involved in acts of terrorism and caused fear in the community. Because of this, there is even the term Ngruki Network. Due to this fact, PPIM is still frequently visited by the police on a monthly basis to monitor all kinds of developments. Despite getting much negative stigma, the santri stated that they are proud to be Indonesian citizens. “I was born and raised here, eating and drinking from this land. Indonesia is rich” is the sentence that was uttered by Fery Ari Wibowo and Rif’an Ubaidillah following a question on whether they were happy to be Indonesians. They even stated that they are ready to defend Indonesia if any disturbances come and threaten the country, going as far as joining the war to defend Indonesia. Nevertheless, they dislike the system that governs Indonesia, which they claimed has “harmed the *ummah*”.

If there is still a belief that PPIM is a breeding ground for intolerance, Noor (2007) reveals that the churches surrounding the boarding school, both Catholic and Protestant, have not experi-

enced any disturbance. This fact can certainly be the answer to the narrative that corners the santri and the ustaz as having intolerant views. Interestingly, when asked about the meaning of diversity for santri, Ferry replied that he does not hate people who are not Muslims. He will only hate them if they have an “arbitrary” action. Similar to Ferry’s answer, Ustaz Muhson said that “diversity is a natural thing”. The answers above illustrate that the Islamic populist movement is not necessarily intolerant as the narrative frames it. It is nothing more than an expression of the *ummah* for the elimination of oppression against them (see Jati, 2013)

After all, the Islamic populist movement often acts on the basis of pragmatism alone. Darul Islam, for example, as part of a post-independence Islamic populist movement, also emerged on the basis of dissatisfaction with the post-colonial government, including disputes over military recognition and disappointment with the Renville Agreement. The Sarekat Islam narrative of injustice was continued by Darul Islam led by Kartosuwiryo (Van Dijk, 1981). When this movement first emerged in 1949, the Indonesian economy was still in a state of disrepair. The economic policy of Benteng in 1950-1957, initiated by Sumitro Djojohadikusumo to enlarge the indigenous people’s economy, failed in its achievement. Instead of having a positive impact on the indigenous people’s economy, the policy of facilitating imports and credit was actually reused by the Chinese, who conspired with corrupt indigenous people (Matanasi 2017; Hadiz 2019). Thus, the indigenous capitalist class that was expected to emerge did not occur; instead, the conglomerate elites were further strengthened.

## **Conclusion**

This study finds that the aspirations of PPIM santri and ustaz are interwoven with the New Islamic Populism. One of them is the aspiration to stop the oppression felt by the *ummah*. The santri and the ustaz stated that the *ummah* is currently at a point where they are experiencing injustice, and the Indonesian government is complicit in this scenario. Under the neoliberal globalisation scheme, Indonesia’s economic conditions have created increasingly severe social and economic inequalities. The problem is that PPIM santri

and ustaz, who are part of the *ummah*, are not people who enjoy the top of the economic pyramid. It should be underlined that the “*ummah*” here is a symbol of Islam used as cultural capital to fight against the elite. So, instead of moving in the name of religious doctrine, they move on the basis of political-economic marginalisation, and Islam is only an instrument to create solidarity. In this context, according to Hadiz’s lexicon, there has been an “Islamisation of dissent”.

Accordingly, the solution to the oppression and injustice is the establishment of an Islamic state which they think will be able to accommodate their interests, even though it is still within the boundaries of the nation-state. A state with Islamic law is considered to be beneficial to them as it will release them from the shackles of injustice. However, this does not indicate with certainty that the PPIM santri and ustaz reject democracy categorically. There is a flexibility of attitude shown by their participation in general elections and their cessation of hatred for democracy if the *ummah* gets a fair allocation of resources that have long been controlled by the elite.

Moreover, compared to other social factions that are part of New Islamic populism, for example, with FPI as an urban marginalised group, PPIM santri and ustaz have similar aspirations and characteristics. However, in the current Indonesian political landscape, FPI itself has been dissolved on the basis of a Joint Decree (SKB) signed by six ministerial-level officials, which refers to the decision of the Constitutional Court Number 82/PUU-XI/2013. With the disbandment, many people believe that the populist movement will collapse. However, this assumption is quite dubious considering that PKS still exists and even experiences an increase in electability. After all, FPI, despite its ferocity, is only a small facet of the *ummah*’s dissatisfaction with the government’s failure to navigate neoliberal globalisation. So, if the disbandment of FPI is intended to stop the populist movement, it does not touch the root of the problem. It is still possible for embryos of Islamic populism to continue to be born, just like when Sarekat Islam gave birth to Darul Islam and when Darul Islam gave birth to several Islamic populist organisations today, such as PPIM.

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