

Islamic Populism in the Context of Rural Agrarian Change

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Abstract. A massive demonstration called "Aksi Bela Islam" (Action to Defend Islam) marks a continuity of the Islamic movement in post-New Order Indonesia. Many observers called it "Islamic populism", a populist response, from the cross-class alliance on behalf of "ummah", towards capitalist development that has been conceived to marginalize Muslim people in the struggle for access to economic and political resources. Despite this proposition, however, many studies still concentrated on the state (instead of capital itself) and the inner urban areas in explaining the development of Islamic populism. On the other hand, empirical facts show that the mass of Action to Defend Islam involves a lot of social segments from the countryside. Agrarian changes in the countryside played an important role in this development. The important role of agrarian change has even given Islamic populism in rural areas its own "characteristic" which therefore must be investigated specifically. This article tries to draw out the study of Islamic populism from the urban "frenzy" for a moment to look at developments at another important locus, namely the countryside.

Keywords: Action to Defend Islam, Agrarian Change, Indonesia, Islamic Populism.

1 Introduction

The end of 2016 witnessed the continuation of the Islamic movement in Indonesia. This movement manifested itself into a large demonstration entitled *Aksi Bela Islam* (Action to Defend Islam). The movement that demanded the conviction of Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok), after being accused of "insulting" *surah Al-Maidah* verse 51, is called by some observers a contemporary form of political Islam called "Islamic populism", which is a cross-class populist response of Muslims to the development of capitalism that is considered to have marginalized them in the context of the struggle for access to economic and political resources (Hadiz 2016; Hadiz and Rakhmani 2017; Hadiz and Robison 2012; Mudhoffir 2018; Savitri and Adriyanti 2018).

The demonstrators have diverse origins when viewed geographically (Mietzner and Muhtadi 2018), organizational affiliations (IPAC 2018), and social classes (Hadiz and Rakhmani 2017). Social class diversity is the most prominent characteristic. Some demonstrators were able to

eat and drink at luxury restaurants with international brands, while others had to squeeze in street stalls and even huddle just to fill their stomachs and quench their thirst. According to observers, this class diversity is one of the distinctive characteristics of Islamic populism.

The classes are at least composed of the national bourgeoisie class, the urban Muslim middle class, and the urban poor class. Each of these classes has different aspirations from each other. At a time when the urban Muslim middle class feels that their social mobility is hampered, the national bourgeoisie class considers that they are marginalized from the stage of national power. Meanwhile, the urban poor feel that access to subsistence is narrowing day by day. These aspirations are the result of their disillusionment with the promises of modernity and capitalism-based development that are considered to have betrayed them (Hadiz and Rakhmani 2017). Therefore, according to observers, the development of Islamic populism should be placed into the contradictions of capitalism. These classes, though opposite to each other, are bound into a common "chain of equivalences" and are knotted through the concept of "*ummah*". This concept is a unifying cross-class alliance in Islamic populism, replacing the proxy of the "people" because the "*ummah*" provides a "cultural pool" that is significant in moving the masses against other forces that are considered to be the culprits of the marginalization of the people (outsiders) while providing a definitive limit on who the people themselves are (insider) (Hadiz 2016).

Such cross-class characteristics, for observers, correlate with another characteristic of Islamic populism, which is "typical" of urban areas. According to Hadiz and Robison (2012) and Hadiz (2016), Islamic populism that takes place in urban areas is a major differentiator from earlier forms of political Islam concentrated in the countryside with its main social classes such as landlords and merchants. This exposition was reflected in the massive demonstrations of Action to Defend Islam concentrated in major cities.

Apart from its typical urban nature, in Islamic populism, there is also a social class that comes from the countryside. This segment of the class seems to be under the spotlight. Among the urban classes, there are rural social classes that are involved in Action to Defend Islam such as in rural Tasikmalaya (Suryarandika 2016) and Bogor (Henaldi 2016), for example. Although they are only considered only "spectators" by some academics (Savitri and Adriyanti 2018), there is some literature that shows alternative portraits. Based on the results of his research on one of the major Islamic boarding schools in Tasikmalaya, Pamungkas (2018) stated that the higher-ups and students involved in Action to Defend Islam have their distinctive basis for consideration, not just participating. In addition, although it does not delve into the origins of the Action to Defend Islam's base power, research by Bazzi et al (2018) explains that the origins of the forces of Islamic populism are rooted in a long history of fighting for access to land tenure in rural areas. In addition, Buehler's (2016) study in West Java also found that the main actors in post-New Order political Islam, as reflected in the massive issuance of regional regulations (*peraturan daerah*) of *shari'ah*, were rural local elites who were autonomous from the national central elites economically and politically.

These facts provide an urgency about the importance of the study of Islamic populism in the countryside. However, it is important to note that the development of capitalism in the countryside, particularly agrarian change, must remain a foothold in explaining the birth of these actors and the Islamic populism movement. In this paper, capitalism is focused on the development of agrarian "social relations of production" which more broadly include the mastery of the means of production, labor, production, political institutions, and cultural institutions (Marx 1973, 1992; Marx and Engels 1970). In contrast to previous academics who

limited the development of capitalism to the institutional dynamics of the state (Hadiz 2016; Hadiz and Robison 2012; Wilson 2019), this paper looks at capitalism from the perspective of broader class relations (Bernstein 2010). The power that local elites have in Islamic populism, as outlined by Pamungkas, Bazzi et al, and Buehler, would be unclear if it were not placed in the context of the development of class relations on which their strengths are based.

Based on this description, this research is important to see the development of Islamic populism in the countryside from the perspective of the development of capitalism. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to explain Islamic populism from the point of view of agrarian change (as a theoretical starting point in looking at the development of capitalism), which concerns changes in the relations of mastery of sources of production.

2 Disclaimer

This research is qualitative. The data in this study were collected using several methods, namely literature studies, observations, and in-depth interviews (including narrative interviews). Narrative interviews are used because there are no adequate written archives to unearth data on Islamic history and agrarian change at the research site. Nevertheless, there are still villagers who are over 80 years old and can still interact smoothly. Narrative interviews, therefore, are used to unearth past data in the form of oral/oral archives so that they can replace written archives. This research was conducted in Bulak, West Java Province. The village was chosen because it is one of the bases of the Action to Defend Islam. Primary data collection was carried out by in-depth interviews with actors involved in the A Action to Defend Islam which included landlords, capitalist farmers, tenant farmers, and agricultural laborers. The selection of informants is carried out using the snowball method to obtain data until it is saturated. 7 key informants were the source of information in this study. This research uses a critical paradigm to determine the class relations that take place in the development of Islamic populism in Bulak. This paradigm can dismantle the formed class formations, both from the perspective of domination of agrarian sources of production as well as political and religious authorities, to be able to see how Islamic populism develops through these class formations. Initial data collection was carried out in January 2020 and continued from October 2020 to February 2021.

3 Historical Context of Bulak

Bulak village is located between two large mountains, namely Mount Salak and Gede Pangrango. The corresponding ecosystem makes agriculture in this region flourish with rice, vegetables, fruits, and perennials plantations as the main commodities. The form of land tenure in this village is already capitalist, where the land is privately owned and the wage relationship between capitalist farmers and agricultural laborers has been established, although there are also some variations involving the profit-sharing labor relationship. In addition, the production process of agricultural commodities in this village is also the result of a division of labor between the agricultural sector and other sectors in urban areas. To meet production and reproductive needs, the residents of Bulak must rely on industrial commodities that come from outside the village.

The development of capitalism in Bulak has been going on for a long time, namely since the Dutch colonial period. As Hoadley (1994) stated, since the entry of the Dutch colonial, social relations of production in rural Java have changed drastically. Therefore, the moment of

"primitive accumulation", namely the beginning of capitalist production relations, has taken place since Dutch colonialism entered Java (Sangadji 2021), including West Java. In this time and beyond, the clerics and *hajijs*, who became the local landowners, have played a dominant role in village life and influenced the process of development of class formations and religious patterns in the future. They became what Geertz (1960) referred to as "cultural brokers", that is, became a bridge between rural national and local political interests.

One of the factors that determine the strength of the scholars and the *hajijs* is that in addition to their position as connectors of colonial interests in the village, they also became actors who were able to mobilize resistance to the colonials themselves. On the one hand, the position given by the colonials to them was able to make them landlords and gather power both socially, politically, and economically. While on the other hand, such forces can activate to counter colonialism when colonial policies are not in their favor or when the tide of nationalism is on its feet in the early quarters of the 20th century.

Following the formation of the republican state, the clerics and the *hajijs* remained the dominant force in rural Java. They didn't fade as Geertz predicted. The position of clerics and *hajijs* has become stronger since a large wave of "Islamism" entered the village. On the other hand, the entry of The Japanese in place of the Dutch also contributed to the ammunition of greater power to these Muslim landlords. Their strength became increasingly dominant when the campaigns and practices of the Green Revolution initiated by the New Order entered the countryside. In this context, the hired relations became developed and gave birth to many Muslim capitalist peasants. When we look closely, these Muslim capitalists had family ties to the earlier landlords and they grew into a class alliance—made up of clerics and *hajijs*—that dominated the political, economic, and cultural life of the Bulak population.

On the other hand, many of the residents fell into the position of the lower class. Many of them have to become smallholder farmers with narrow land tenure or become agricultural laborers because they cannot control the slightest land. Not a few of the villagers had to be thrown into non-agricultural sectors by working as hawkers, public transportation drivers, and so on. The development of class relations in Bulak is very historical and is formed by several events that also take place historically.

4 Two Moments of Class Dynamics

4.1 Green Revolution: The Upside Down of Clove and Melon

Two pivotal moments marked the dynamics of the class and in turn, became the shaping factors for the development of Islamic populism in Bulak. The first moment, as mentioned earlier, was the entry of the Green Revolution into the countryside in the 1970s. The Green Revolution is indeed crowded with debate in academic circles, but, despite these debates, the widening of inequality in the control of agrarian sources is an empirical fact that occurred in Bulak. This fact confirms the thesis that the class differentiation (Husken and White 1989) and class stratification (Hayami and Kikuchi 1987) that have been going on before have increased since the Green Revolution took place.

Landlords and *hajijs* were the class that benefited most from large land tenure and access to other agrarian means of production. This control began since Dutch colonialism at least in the late 19th century with the form of control over the "crooked land". Some of them remained

landlords by implementing a profit-sharing system (though not entirely), while others transformed into Muslim capitalist peasants, who employed agricultural laborers through a wage system.

"The lands in the village used to be owned by Mr. Lurah and hajj's. There are the famous Hajj's M and Hajj's D. Hajj's M was also the first village head here during the Dutch era. From the era of independence until now, the lands have been passed on to posterity. Even though it was a "crooked" ground the term used to be. Not to be owned" (AR, Tenant Farmer)

The reason behind their growing power, as already mentioned, is the position they played as cultural brokers by disseminating Green Revolution campaigns and practices in the countryside. Not a few scholars and hajj's became irrigation regulatory officials, as also found in other West Java regions by Horikhosi (1976). In addition, many of them access capital credits and agricultural production inputs such as fertilizers, seeds, pesticides, and various agricultural equipment easily because of their political position as the elite of the farmer group (Poktan).

"... Poktan contains rich farmers if here. Have a land of at least 1 ha. If it's here (1 ha) it's already rich. Below that, can't ... not a real farmer. They are the ones who feel the subsidies for seeds, fertilizers, medicines, etc...". (HA, Capitalist Peasants)

The start of the intensification project of clove commodities (Situmorang 1985) and melons in the 1970s made the accumulated wealth of scholars and hajj's increase quite drastically. The Green Revolution, which is another name for the intensification and extensibility of national food production, demands an acceleration of the production of agricultural commodities to increase. At this time, the wage work system developed rapidly because it was considered more effective. Many scholars and especially hajj's have implemented a daily wage system, although not a few still implement a profit-sharing system. In Bulak society, every cleric is at least characterized by their position as the leader of the assembly or Islamic boarding school. Residents who study religion in assemblies or boarding schools are considered their "students" (santri). This status in turn helped form a working relationship between the clergy and their workers who were students.

Ulama is the only figure who has the privilege to implement the so-called "service work", which is a labor system in which students work on the land of the scholars without pay or with wages below the applicable standards. In exchange, these students received "protection" from the scholars. While the clerics only hired laborers from their students, the hajj's were relatively more open in hiring their workers and mostly used the daily wage system. With the "work of service" system, the scholars were able to accumulate their wealth and further strengthen their political and cultural influence in the countryside.

"Yes, if it's the same, I'm just given how much wages. We are taught to be respectful because they are our handles to survive the afterlife. If there is a problem here, it is also kyai who helps the residents. As much as possible, yes, we will repay the term" (U, Agricultural laborer, and Tenant Farmer)

The hajj's who are mostly rural Muslim capitalists has historically formed class alliances with the clerics through family marriages. These political alliances proved very useful in further strengthening their dominance. A strong formal political position makes village policies very favorable to them, such as irrigation regulatory posts, for example. Marriage is one of the

mediums of the political alliance between ulama and hajj's, as revealed in the story of KA and HA.

"The common thing is (marriage between the clerical family and the hajj's). KA is HM's son-in-law. It used to be that when he was married, I was present. Many more are like him... the children of HA was also married to the children of the big kyai here, such as KH, HC..." (U, Agricultural laborer and Tenant Farmer)

So is market access. Their role as cultural brokers they use to build economic and political partnerships with cigarette factory entrepreneurs in the city and local-level politicians.

"In the past, if you sell cloves directly to the cigarette factory, it has not been through a cooperative. It happened to be Mr. Haji's acquaintance, so it was easy" (HA, Capitalist Farmer)

This network is generally a legacy of their previous parents or the result of direct encounters with the New Order police and military apparatus to Bulak. KA, for example, built his political network from the "legacy" of his parents.

"My grandfather is kyai too, a famous person... my grandfather has a martial arts college... many people from outside Bogor learned from him. From Jakarta, just in the past to how many trucks came, from ABRI, Kopassus, all to grandpa's place to learn martial arts... so the political connection to the central level is already from the grandfather" (KA, Clerics, and Landlords)

Unlike the KA, people like HA got their political network from direct encounters with police and military apparatus who escorted President Soeharto to one of the large farms in the Tapos region.

"Every week I always gives food to them (the guards). My wife cooks free-range chicken every week twenty heads. Never paid. Free of charge. I just be sincere. They also stayed at (the house) here. In fact, until now, many police and soldiers stayed here. Already familiar with the commander... if there is anything they help me" (HA, Capitalist Peasant)

This network instantly made them master aspects of political economy in Bulak. When cloves and melons entered the countryside in the 1970s, residents with backgrounds as smallholders and tenants had indeed tasted the sweetness of these two commodities. Melon production is not difficult, making the residents reap profits only by renting land for one plot (450m²). So do cloves. They get land rent from landlords and hajj's, although at a price that is not cheap. Nevertheless, the sweetness of cloves and melons they can only taste for a while. Entering the 1990s, the price of cloves plummeted, while melons began to be monopolized by Chinese business people coming from outside the village. Instantly the sweetness of cloves and melons turned into a bitter history for those classes. Cloves monopolized by Suharto's family and cronies through the Village Unit Cooperative (KUD) made prices plummet and made farmers lose money. Meanwhile, with the presence of Chinese businessmen, the residents lost competition in the melon business because their capital was too small compared to the capital of the Chinese businessman. The inhabitants know these times as times of "crisis".

Many of the smallholders and renters are in debt and have to sell their primary assets, such as vehicles and even houses, just to pay damages. Their access to land rent was also reduced due to the increase in rent prices, which was partly due to the increasing demand for rent and the change of land owned by smallholder farmers into the hands of Chinese businessmen. On the

other hand, for "non-santri" workers, access to agricultural work is reduced because many Chinese business people bring their laborers from outside the village. The only way is to work on Muslim landlords and capitalists, i.e. the clerics and hajj's, although the chances are very small because the scholars are used to hiring their students. Those who could not get opportunities were forced to be thrown into the non-agricultural sectors, although they were also not completely thrown out.

"My generation is one of the generations that were unlucky because I didn't have time to think about "green gold" (melons) and cloves because they had been brought bankrupt by my father. All because of Tomi (Suharto) and the Chinese people..." (M, Agricultural laborer)

While on the other hand, the clerics and hajj's were able to secure their position amid a crisis. Although the price of cloves plummeted, the political network they had provided them with access to clove sales at a relatively favorable price. The same is the case with melons. When melons were controlled by Chinese businessmen, the scholars and hajj's also lost the competition. However, they still have a safety net in the form of other commodities such as rice and vegetables in their fields. The rise of "cheap" labor in the countryside during the clove and melon crisis turned out to be one of the saviors of the farming business of landlords and Muslim capitalists. The system of "service work" is increasingly in place and this time it is not only used by scholars but also by hajj's. The intensification of this system is due to the large number of workers who owe them and in return, the residents have to do work at low wages or without pay at all until their debts are paid off. However, many of them regarded the "service work" as a kindness and a form of help given to them by the clergy.

"... Fortunately, KA helped me. Even if the wages are small, but if there is no him I may not be able to pay the debt. So it's still good for someone to give a job" (U, Agricultural laborer, and Tenant Farmer)

The crisis that made the lower-class villagers slip down can be put to good use by the Muslim landlords and capitalists in Bulak. With the economic, political, and cultural capital they have, they strengthen their position among the population. This situation is very similar to the situation when political turbulence occurred nationwide in the mid-1960s and scorched anyone affiliated with the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI). Although the turbulence did not destabilize the people of Bulak—because there was no communist base in the village—the threat was felt and had made the residents somewhat panicked. In this situation, it is precisely the power and dominance of the ulama and the hajj's as holders of political and cultural authority in the village are increasing.

4.2 The Raising of Chinese Businessman

The second moment is the emergence and development of the power of Chinese business people in Bulak since the mid-1990s. Although the clerics and hajj's were able to survive the crisis of the 1990s, the arrival of Chinese businessmen in Bulak became a threat to their later strength. The dominance in melon commodities became the beginning of the business expansion of Chinese entrepreneurs into two main sectors, namely property and teak plantations. The location of Bulak Village flanked by mountains makes lodging and entertainment such as villas and resorts quite mushrooming. Entering the 2000s, Chinese business people began to build villas and resorts and in turn were able to dominate this sector. In fact, some old villas and resorts were empty of visitors and closed because they were less marketable than the magnificent villas and resorts owned by Chinese business people. In addition, Chinese business people also converted former clove gardens and vacant lands into

teak plantations. In this sector, they even employed local Muslim leaders and were able to expand their plantations in the future. The mastery of agrarian sources of production coincided with the entry of Chinese businessmen into the local political arena. The election of the village chief (Pilkades) which became the site of the fight to secure dominance began to be intervened by the power of Chinese businessmen. Until the peak, the Chinese business people were able to win the village head candidates they supported and not only secured, but also developed their business in Bulak.

The emergence of Chinese businessmen gave birth to a real threat to the continuation of the political power of the clerics and the Hajj's. Although some factions of clerics and hajj's had an alliance with Chinese businessmen in the Pilkades to defeat the faction of clerics and hajj's who had been in power for a long time, the alliance only lasted a short time because they immediately realized that their real enemies who could knock out their power in the village were Chinese businessmen. It was this situation that became the basis for the emergence of Islamic populism in the countryside. Although many academics consider urban areas to be the main site for the birth of Islamic populism, empirical facts show that the countryside is also another important site that has its own characteristics. The main characteristic is that agrarian change, which has been going on since the 1990s, became the basis for the emergence of Islamic populism in the countryside. These changes include land tenure, commodities, job markets, political arenas, and cultural sites.

The fall of melon commodities into the hands of Chinese businessmen became the basic foothold for the expansion of Chinese businessmen into other business sectors in the village. There are many scholars and hajj's whose agricultural business is threatened due to the expansion and growing power of Chinese businessmen in the political arena. On the other hand, access to narrowed land rents also makes Islamic populism welcomed by poor farmers because land rents are a mechanism on which they depend on their lives. Meanwhile, for agricultural laborers, the shrinkage of employment opportunities was one of the main reasons for their participation in the ranks of supporters of Islamic populism under the rhetoric of their clerics. This narrowing of access to production resources coincided with the narrowing of religious access for the villagers. Villa and resort businesses that offer entertainment often interfere with the daily religious rituals of the residents. The sound of music and firecrackers sounds loud with fairly frequent intensity. The new culture displayed by Chinese businessmen through their property business is a threat to the sustainability of the Bulak community, which has long made Islam a symbol of daily life. In fact, there was almost an act of unilateral closure of bulak residents against one of the resorts for allegedly holding a liquor party, although the action soon subsided due to negotiations between village officials, clerics, and resort owners.

"Brazen is indeed them (Chinese business people)! I'm just waking up here and there. Not heeding scholars like me. Disrupting order... this is a village that is famous for its Islamic symbolic! Their presence I suspect will destroy us Muslims here" (KA, Ulama and Landlords)

5 Islamic Populism in the Countryside: Relation of Agrarian Change and Identity Politics

The socio-economic facts in the form of agrarian change were in turn able to be translated into political facts by the scholars and the Hajj's into an alliance of Islamic populism. This ability

is based on the strong legitimacy of the clergy as leaders of the community that have been built since the colonial period took place. The Assembly became the foremost institution in strengthening the legitimacy. Through regular recitation activities of fiqh and interpretation, the assembly becomes a place where various social issues are discussed. These issues include everyday issues, criminality, divorce, agriculture, and also include land tenure relationships. In recitation, the cleric acts as a teacher teaches the pupil.

"In this village, kyai or clerics not only teach Islam, but also take care of agricultural problems, marriage, inheritance. There is a saying, "ngeprok cai memeh ceret" (closing the water before spilling), meaning that before the problem gets bigger, it must be solved" (KA, Ulama and Landlords)

In the context of Islamic populism, the assembly provided a direct connection between the clerics and the hajj's with the villagers. Land expansion by Chinese businessmen translates into political facts in the form of "threats" and "tyranny" to the lives of the inhabitants. In addition to complicating the economic life of the population, the scholars spread "anti-Chinese" sentiments, a sentiment that can be heard in daily conversations with residents when talking about the development of village development. Islamic teachings, which according to Hadiz (2016) provide a "cultural pool", are used in constructing the populist narrative. "*Isy kariman aw mut shahidan*", which means that "noble life or martyrdom", is one of the religious concepts used in the development of Islamic populism. The clerics called for the need for the unity of the "ummah" or muslims to carry out "*jihad*" against the threat of Chinese business people. *Jihad* is a knot of aspiration that brings together and articulates the ongoing aspects of agrarian politics and identity politics.

"Conditions are now getting more chaotic. The economy is getting tougher. While the government seems to be quietly... we Muslims must not be silent. We must rise. How do you get up, yes, we must unite ... *Isy kariman aw mut shahidan!* We must uphold a glorious life. That's what it means. If you can't, you are martyred. It means that we have to fight tyranny. Well, who's the zalim? Yes Chinese-Chinese it is. They casually destroyed the lives of the muslims here with their great capital" (KA, Ulama and Landlords)

It was in this context that Islamic populism, manifested into the Action to Defend Islam, emerged and flourished in the countryside. Occupying positions as cultural figures as well as muslim landlords and capitalists, the scholars translated agrarian change as a threat and tyranny to all walks of life and therefore obliged to resist. Noble living is an absolute condition for the resistance of the inhabitants, while martyrdom is another condition that must be chosen if noble life is not conveyed.

6 Conclusion

The Islamic populism that emerged and developed in Bulak has its own characteristics that are different from Islamic populism in urban areas. Although urbanism is a site of the emergence of Islamic populism, it has a peculiarity that can only be understood when placed in the context of the wider development of capitalism. The shift in the relationship between the control of agrarian sources of production, which can be seen from the history of agrarian change in the local context is one of the main determinations that is the background for the emergence and development of Islamic populism in the countryside. This agrarian change cannot be placed exclusively as a mere economic phenomenon, but rather must be placed in

complexity among the various interconnected aspects including political and cultural. Class dynamics, as explained by Bernstein (2010), include not only the development and change of class formations concerning material sources such as land, but also includes non-economic aspects such as identity and religion. Therefore, the complexity and connectedness between these aspects cannot be separated and ignored.

Islamic populism that developed in the countryside needs to be studied specifically because it has distinctive characteristics. Despite the many views of academics who see the city as a major site of Islamic populism, the development of Islamic populism in the countryside should also get attention because in addition to being less explored, understanding the rural context can also provide a more complete picture of the development of Islamic populism. It certainly becomes interesting to see how the countryside in other parts of Java and outside Java became the locus of the emergence and development of Islamic populism in Indonesia. Agrarian change, as a very prominent phenomenon in rural areas, will provide a more nuanced picture in coloring the discussion of the theme of Islamic populism in Indonesia.

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