

## Article

### Appealing to a Religiously Defined ‘the People’: How Religion Was Performatively Operationalized in the 2019 and 2024 Election Campaigns of Indonesia’s President-Elect

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#### *Abstract*

*Observers widely acknowledged the lack of divisive Islamist populism in Indonesia’s 2024 Presidential Elections. This was in stark contrast to the 2019 elections in which Prabowo Subianto, the case study of this article and new leader of Indonesia, led a campaign that overtly supported Islamist interests and actors, and deepened religio-ethnic tensions in society. Despite this acknowledgement, it remains unclear if religion was still operationalized – albeit differently - in his most recent campaigning efforts. This article therefore seeks to examine if religion was politicized and performed by Prabowo in 2024 and contrast the findings with 2019 to address how and why his instrumentalization of religion varied significantly. Applying a discursive-performative lens, discourse analysis will be used to determine if and how religion featured in a sample of Prabowo Subianto’s speeches (six speeches in total, three from each election campaign). Specifically, this analysis will explore how references to religion and a religious community reflect a) his political goals and b) the political community he is attempting to engage. It will also discuss these findings in the context of contemporary populism studies.*

**Keywords:** Religion, religious populism, Indonesia, Prabowo, elections

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### **Introduction: Religion in Populist Campaigning**

Although there has been significant progress in recent years, the study of religious populism in non-Western democratic campaigning remains underdeveloped (Sumiala et al., 2023; Zuquete, 2017; Beuter et al, 2023). This is an important gap to address, because understanding the role of religion in electoral politics is important when religion and religious majoritarianism are tightly entangled in national identity, culture, and society and resulting in an inherently more complex phenomenon (Yabanci, 2020: 93; Yilmaz & Morieson, 2022).

Electoral campaigns in these countries may feature both exclusionary populist appeals in which the religiously defined in-group is often used as a juxtaposition with ‘evil’ elites and ‘others’ (DeHanas & Shterin, 2018). What has been examined less, particularly in empirical research, is the politicization of religion to link together and homogenize a range of interests and identities (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001), influence the perception of the leader, and create enthusiasm for their political mission.

Indonesia’s 2024 presidential election – and its winner – provides a fascinating account of the instrumentalization of religion in political campaigning. To better understand Indonesia’s new leader and how he may command over the country’s religio-political space, this article considers Prabowo Subianto’s populist orientation toward Islamism in 2019 and compares it with his use of religion in 2024’s campaign, when Islamist rhetoric was notably absent. This has not yet been addressed adequately, nor supported by empirical research, although the change has been widely observed in political commentaries of the recent election (Ismail & Koh, 2024; Chaplin & Jurdi, 2024; Rozy, 2024).

### **A Brief Note on Indonesia’s Recent Religious-Political Context**

In cases of Islamist populism, researchers have found that ‘the people’ are a collectivized identity group (‘pious Muslims’) consisting of a range of Muslim identities and interests that are grouped together and politicized (Susanto, 2019; Hadiz, 2018). In Indonesia, the literature indicates that in recent history, a range of actors have interacted with or influenced religious populism in Indonesia: from politicians and parties, social media influencers and online preachers, through to grassroots movements and organizations (Mietzner, 2020; Hadiz, 2018; Barton et al., 2021; Kayane, 2020; Widian et al., 2022).

In 2019, Prabowo Subianto constructed his political image, narratives, and performances in response to the socio-political tensions that had been heightening for some time in Indonesia. Although beyond the limitations of this article to explain in detail, it is suffice to note here that polarization in recent years had been exacerbated by various populist and extreme actors who used religion to inflame tensions, push for social and political change, and destabilize conditions for religious minorities (Mietzner, 2020; Widian et al., 2022; Temby, 2019).

The most notable period of intensification occurred during the ‘anti-Ahok’ mass protest movement, born in the lead up to the 2017 gubernatorial elections. The then Christian-Chinese governor of Jakarta, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (‘Ahok’) was accused of blasphemy after citing a single verse from the Qur’an, and this shared grievance brought together a range of Islamist actors and many Indonesians in a significant period of populist mobilization (Mietzner, 2020; Hadiz, 2018; Mietzner & Muhtadi, 2018; Jaffrey, 2021: 224-225). Mietzner (2020) notes that Prabowo attached himself to this mobilization event, and incorporated Islamist populism and Islamist actors into his campaigning effort. Operationalizing religious populism in his election campaign, Prabowo became a highly influential player in one of the most divisive political contestations in Indonesia’s history (Ismail & Koh, 2024).

This article contributes to the developing field of religious populism by studying its manifestation in the discourses and performances of Prabowo Subianto in the last two Indonesian elections (2019 and 2024). In both election cycles, Prabowo makes references to religion and conveys religious meaning to the audience he is seeking support from. Yet, scholars widely agree that in 2019, Prabowo used Islamist populism to further his political agenda, mobilize supporters and exploit religio-ethnic tensions in Indonesia (Mietzner, 2020; Hadiz, 2018; Barton et al., 2021). In 2024 however, observers noted that Prabowo refrained from religious populism’s polarizing and antagonistic accounts of people in society (Ismail & Koh, 2024; Chaplin & Jurdi, 2024; Rozy, 2024), although there is little written about his broader incorporation – or eradication - of religion in his most recent political performances.

Equally, by using Indonesia as a case study, this article underlines how religious populism in the socio-political context of more religious societies usually presents quite differently from democracies of the secularized Western variety (Wawrzynski & Marszalek-Kawa, 2022: 2; Falki, 2022: 227).

## **Methodology**

This research employs a deductive qualitative approach, in which the theoretical framework of this paper will guide the analysis of collected data (Widian et al., 2022: 354). Discourse analysis will be used to identify and compare the rhetorical religious elements of a sample of Prabowo’s communications.

The article will ultimately explore how Prabowo’s political style has pivoted away from an exclusionary religious populist style – and what it can teach us about the under-studied role of religion in electoral campaigning.

## **Sample Data Collection**

This article will use a sample of Prabowo’s campaign speeches which were selected based on a number of considerations, including: Prabowo discussing his campaign and policies, the length of the speech - longer speeches were favored because they provided more data to analyze, and speeches that occurred shortly (in the three months maximum prior) before the election when a leader is likely to most powerfully perform their

political persona.

*Sample 1:* Prabowo's official national speech, 'Indonesia Menang' at the Jakarta Convention Center, Jakarta, 2019.

*Sample 2:* Opening campaign speech in Kotabaru, Gondokusuman – Yogyakarta, 2019.

*Sample 3:* Prabowo. CNN Indonesia. Pidato Berapi-Api GBK, 2019.

*Sample 4:* Prabowo's political speech in Stadion Gelora Bandung, Bandung, West Java, on February 8, 2024.

*Sample 5:* The People Party for the Progress of Indonesia (Pesta Rakyat untuk Indonesia Maju) in Gelora Bung Karno (GBK) Stadium, Senayan, Jakarta, February 10, 2024.

*Sample 6:* Prabowo Subianto's speech at a volunteer consolidation event at the Pekanbaru Youth Center, Riau, 2024.

### **Data Analysis**

Each author contributing to this research is familiar with and currently undertaking scholarship into the context of Indonesia and Indonesian politics, and religious populism. Our analyses have been guided by our understanding of the socio-political context these speeches have been presented in. One contributor is a native Indonesian and has assisted in ensuring the integrity of the transcribed and translated speeches.

The four speeches were read in full several times before selecting the passages that have been used for the following analyses. These passages were selected based on their relationship with key themes of religion, religious populism, and religious association. This process resulted in the identification of certain key narrative themes, which the passages have been categorized under below.

### **References to God, Prophet Muhammad, and Religion**

In all sets of 2019 and 2024 speeches, Prabowo references Islam as a shared religion with the Indonesian people, and in each case, he opens with an Islamic greeting to the crowd.

In the 2019 speeches, Prabowo drew attention to his personal affinity with God and religion. In sample one (2019), he frames his concluding comments by declaring himself "a proud son of the nation and of Islam." Similarly, in sample two (2019), he greets the crowd and immediately declares himself a Muslim:

"I pray that Yogyakarta is in a state of health and well-being. As a Muslim, let us send prayers and peace to our beloved Prophet Muhammad, who has enlightened us all."

Populism often involves the personalization of politics, where voters connect with a political actor and their representation rather than strictly the set of policies and party

affiliation they have (Soare, 2017; Weyland, 2017). In the above examples, Prabowo is drawing attention to himself as a Muslim and son of Islam, which supports his attempts at presenting himself as a pious religious figure throughout the 2019 campaign, and as will be demonstrated below, the savior of Indonesia.

In sample 3 (2019) Prabowo demonstrates this personalization again and links his happiness with serving the Indonesian people. He owes this to God for providing him with the opportunity to serve:

*“And I invite all my friends to do the same. We are devoted, we serve the state and the nation and the people. And I am already 68 years old. The Almighty has given me too much. I am determined. The rest of my life is for the people of Indonesia. My happiness, my joy, if I can see the wealth of Indonesia returning to the people of Indonesia. I am happy.”*

In one of the 2024 sample speeches (sample 4), Prabowo ends his speech with a prayer:

*“I close my remarks with my prayer, I pray for the presence of Allah, subhanahu wa taala, God the Great, God the Almighty, who rules all the worlds. It is only to You that we pray, only to You that we ask for help. O Allah, O Lord, give us strength, amen, so that we are strong to receive the mandate from the people of Indonesia, so that we have the ability, wisdom, intelligence, courage, honesty, sincerity to protect the people of Indonesia ... O Allah, give us the strength, give us the power to continue to be loyal to the nation and the people of Indonesia, amen. Thank you, O Allah, thank you for everything you have given, thank you for your favor, thank you for all the gifts you have given. Thank you. Wassalamualaikum warahmatullahi wabarakatuh.”*

This prayer frames the Prabowo and the audience as collective Muslims who are seeking the right direction for Indonesia from God. While the sincerity of this prayer is not for our judgement, we can comment that religion is politicized to create unity and to frame Prabowo's seeking of power as a holy and pious mission.

In sample 6 (2024) Prabowo expresses moral absolutisms of right, wrong and evil to highlight the virtuous path he is on:

*“I got teachings from my ustaz-ustaz, from my kiai-kiai, from my teachers. If you are insulted, if you are mocked, if you are slandered, return it to the almighty. I believe that right is right, wrong is wrong, evil is evil, I continue on the right path, I have no doubt, O God, O Allah subhanahu wa ta'ala.”*

### **The Discursive Construction of Crisis, Breakdown, and Threat**

The sample speeches show Prabowo constructing a rhetorical crisis to a much greater degree in 2019 than he did in 2024 campaigning. Although these passages are not always inherently related to religion, the analysis will demonstrate how these crises can be used to augment an image of saviorhood by the political actor from 'evil' elites, which tends to lean on religious ideals and association.

A key narrative theme in the 2019 samples is that Indonesia is weak, threatened and at a crucial crossroads for its survival. This is most pronounced in the first sample, in which he shares a tragic story of a farm laborer and father who died by suicide because of the burden of his debts, and of the one in three Indonesian children who are malnourished, the ordinary people who can't afford to live, and the debt Indonesia keeps accruing on a global scale. In the second sample, Prabowo evocatively claims that "our country is sick" and "Mother Earth is being raped" and "the rights of people are being trampled on."

This state of crisis is attributed to the "handful of elites in Jakarta" that "do as they please." Prabowo personalizes this state of crisis such as in sample 2 (2019) when he declares:

*"I speak what's in my heart. I'm fed up, fed up with the antics of the evil elite in Jakarta. Fed up. Always lying, always lying, lying, lying. Lying to the people."*

Religious populism is often used, as it has been here, to create moral distinctions between the 'good' people and the 'evil' others (e.g. DeHanas and Shterin, 2018).

The perpetuation of crisis, threat and blame was almost absent in the most recent election. In a significant pivot in 2024, Prabowo became allies with and endorsed by his former opposition President Jokowi, despite Prabowo having spread unfounded rumors about Jokowi secretly being a Chinese Christian who was selling out Indonesia in the former election (Lam, 2023). This consequently saw a change in Prabowo's rhetoric, in which he stopped performing a state of despair when discussing Indonesia and blaming the political elites and government. For example, in sample 3 (2024), Prabowo claimed that Indonesia will become great and prosperous:

*"Brothers and sisters, on the 14th of February, all of us, brothers and sisters, will determine the future of your children and grandchildren, brothers and sisters. We are now at a crossroads. Do we want to improve, do we want to progress, do we want to become a prosperous country, or do we want to become a mediocre country? Ladies and gentlemen, Prabowo Gibran and Koalisi Indonesia Maju, we are determined to continue all the foundations that have been built."*

In sample 4 (2024) Prabowo again optimistically describes Indonesia and the state of the country left by President Jokowi:

*"We are also grateful to President Joko Widodo, ladies and gentlemen, ladies and gentlemen, ladies and gentlemen, the Indonesian nation is a great nation, not just a great territory, not just a great population, but a great heart, a great soul, a great character, ladies and gentlemen."*

We can see a clear change in Prabowo's strategy from the above passages, from claiming that Indonesia is facing imminent threats from internal and external factors and urgently needing a leader to save the country and its people, to portraying Indonesia as being on the right track but needing a leader to lead it to greatness.

## Prabowo as the Saviour of Indonesia

Political actors using a populist style generally rely on constructing a state of crisis, and then portraying themselves as the one – perhaps the only one – that can lead the people through the crisis or breakdown (Moffitt, 2016; Moffitt, 2020).

When religion is incorporated into this rhetoric, it can enhance and add credibility to these claims by sacralizing the leader (as the ‘savior’) and consequently, their politics take on a transcendent nature (Zuquete, 2017; Yilmaz, Morieson & Demir, 2021; Yabanci, 2020). Furthermore, when a leader references the majority religion, and appeals to the religious community, they are lending legitimacy and authenticity to their political agenda. We can see this in sample 1 (2019) when Prabowo ends his speech with:

*“As a proud son of the nation and of Islam, allow me to proclaim the takbir; ‘Allahu Akbar! Allahu Akbar! Allahu Akbar! Independence! Independence!’ ‘Good luck fighting, together for a victorious Indonesia’.”*

In this passage, Prabowo is creating a connection between himself (a son of Islam), God and religion of ‘the people’ (Allahu Akbar! God is Greatest!) and Indonesia’s independence (exclaiming and repeating Independence! following the takbir). Prabowo concludes his address in sample 2 (2019) in similar terms:

*“Then, after voting, guard the counting until it’s finished. God willing, the people will win, Indonesia will win. Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar, Independence, Independence, Independence. Thank you.”*

In sample 3 (2019) Prabowo once again portrays his political career as a sacred mission that has been granted by God. This example highlights his perceived role as fighting for justice and against those he opposes (the elite government):

*“I am grateful. I am grateful. To God Almighty. God is great. Thank you, God. You gave me the opportunity. To defend the people. Danio. You gave me a chance. With these noble figures. You gave me a chance. To stand up for truth and justice. Thank you, Lord. You gave me the opportunity. To fight against the budget of wrath. To fight against injustice. To fight against leaders who deceive their own people.”*

Interestingly, while Prabowo’s 2024 speeches did not construct a vision of Indonesia in crisis like they did in 2019, the most pronounced instance of Prabowo performing as the savior of Indonesia came from one of the 2024 campaign speeches (sample 3). In this example, Prabowo narrates to the crowd:

*“Ladies and gentlemen, from the young age of 18, I have pledged that I am ready to die for the nation and people of Indonesia. Ladies and gentlemen, my ustaz, my kiai, taught me, ‘Prabowo, as a Muslim, before you spend your last breath, you must say two sentences of shahada.’ And I have said it in my life, because I should have been called by God. It turns out that God still gives, Allah subhanahu wa ta’ala still gives me breath, still gives me strength, still gives me health. That means I have to fulfil my duty to the nation*



*and the people of Indonesia. And I, at this moment, after I have risked my life for decades for this republic, I am not willing to still see poor people in Indonesia.”*

In this passage, Prabowo describes his political career as a sacred mission. Claiming that he is ready to die for the nation to fulfil this religious duty from God, Prabowo is making a passionate appeal to the emotions of the audience.

This is an interesting finding. It is quite evident that Prabowo was operationalizing exclusionary religious populism in 2019 to engage with the surging popularity of Islamist sentiment at the time. Yet in 2024, the above examples highlight Prabowo performatively and discursively communicating his religious identity and appealing to the religious identity of his audience.

### **Support for Islamist Actors and Collectives**

Across the two election cycles, Prabowo expressed his support for very different political and social actors. In 2019 Prabowo clearly signaled to and supported to Islamist influences in Indonesian society. In sample 2 (2019) for example, Prabowo directly endorses the National Movement to Guard Ulama’s Religious Edicts (GNPF Ulama) and the populist Islamist group the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI):

*“Ladies and gentlemen, thank you GNPF, thank you 212, thank you FPI. They want to accuse you of being radical. I say you are not radical. Why, do they want to pit Islam against Nationalism? Why do they want to pit Islam against Pancasila? Islamic leaders who participated in the birth of Pancasila, ladies and gentlemen.”*

This quote demonstrates how Prabowo aligned himself with Islamist groups and movements that were widely acknowledged as accelerating religio-ethnic tensions and hostilities in Indonesian society, particularly against ethnic Chinese Christians. However, in this passage, Prabowo is implying that ‘they’ (the ‘others’) are responsible for these tensions by pitting Islam (Islamists) against the state and its ideology. Later in the speech, he directly places himself in the Islamist camp, stating:

*“To say we are radical Islamists is an overstatement; we respect and protect all religions, all ethnic groups, and ethnicities.”*

Although Prabowo is attempting to portray his mission as one of inclusivity, in this same statement he is also drawing attention to his association with the populist Islamist movement and the figures attached to it. As pointed out above, these figures are known to work against various types of pluralism in society.

In sample 3 (2019), Prabowo once again casts a blurry shadow of his position towards Islamism, which likely reflects an attempt to appeal to a broader support base. We also note an attempt to minimize negative perceptions of the Islamist actors he has associated with:

*Ladies and gentlemen. I am with Sandiaga Uno. We have no intention. We have no*



*intention. Apart from working, serving, and devoting to all the people of Indonesia. Some say Prabowo-Sandi, the Coalition of Indonesia Adil Makmur, will change the Pancasila state. Lies! We will establish a khilafah state. Lies! This I say is slander. Cruel slander. Cruel slander. Cruel slander. But it doesn't sell. The Indonesian people will not be affected, brothers and sisters. That's right. That's right. Our Ustadz-ustadz, our kiai-kiai, always teach that Indonesian Islam is Islam rahmatan lil alamin. Our Islam, peaceful Islam."*

By the 2024 election, Prabowo had publicly cut all ties with Islamist figures and instead allied himself with more moderate religious figures and organizations, including the leadership of one of Indonesia's largest Islamic organizations, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) (Chaplin & Jurdi, 2024; Lam, 2023). As demonstrated in earlier passages analyzed, he redirected his support to the mainstream and became a vocal supporter of his predecessor – and former opponent - President Jokowi.

### **Calling for Unity and Inclusivity**

Instead of the polarizing religious rhetoric Prabowo became known for in his 2019 campaigning, 2024 saw the leader operationalize religion to strengthen his new political agenda of unity and inclusion. For instance, in sample 3 (2024), he claimed:

*"Prabowo, Prabowo, Prabowo, ladies and gentlemen, our ustadz-ustadz, our kiai-kiai, our religious leaders, teach us, religious people, pious people, you can't demonize others, you can't insult others, you can't slander others, you can't fight against each other, right, ladies and gentlemen..."*

Prabowo is still displaying a people-centeredness here, and addressing those who follow and study Islam. Religion here becomes a driver for Prabowo's new agenda for the de-polarization of Indonesian society (Arifianto & Budiatri, 2024). In sample 4 (2024), Prabowo expresses a similar desire and need for peace and the unification of the Indonesian people, although he steers away from using religious justifications:

*"The condition is that we must get along, we must unite, we must be peaceful, we must not fight anymore, we must not divide, we must not suspect each other, demonize each other, ridicule each other, slander each other. No, we must unite so that we become a great country, our people prosper, we eliminate poverty from the land of Indonesia, ladies, and gentlemen."*

In sample 4 (2024) we also see Prabowo making a rhetorical effort to include the ethnic Chinese Christians he had vilified in the past. Although staying away from religious categorization, he stated:

*"Firstly, I would like to congratulate all Muslims for celebrating the great day of Isra Mikraj, and also to wish our brothers and sisters of Chinese ethnicity who are celebrating the Lunar New Year. If I am not mistaken, today is exactly the Lunar New Year for the Chinese ethnic group, ladies, and gentlemen."*

These samples are a clear demonstration of Prabowo's decision to move away from polarizing and antagonistic discourses and performances. There are several reasons why he has changed his strategy (Yilmaz et al., 2024 discuss these in their recent work) but this discourse analysis has also demonstrated that he continues to rely on the mobilizing and legitimizing power of religion in addressing and collectivizing 'the people' and connecting his political agenda with the beliefs and culture of the majority religion.

### **Concluding Remarks and Future Research**

Whether or not Prabowo will return to a religious populist style that antagonizes 'elites' and 'others' and aligns itself with Islamist actors and ideals cannot yet be determined. What we can identify is that his political style in the most recent election was distinctly flavored by a characteristically populist effort to appeal to 'the people,' achieved by communicative strategies that sought the approval of various segments of society (see Yilmaz et al., 2024). Most relevant to this article was Prabowo's use of religious rhetoric which, as this discourse analysis highlighted, continues to play a central role in his campaign speeches and efforts and showed a distinct effort to appeal to a (shared) collective Muslim identity. With recent polling showing that religious affiliations and identities continue to inform how many Indonesians vote (Chaplin & Jurdi, 2024), this undoubtedly contributed to his electoral success.

Ultimately, we note a shift from Islamist mobilization to a mobilization directed towards Indonesian Muslims. Like other politicized religions, Islamist ideals are often far removed from the religion it is associated with. Islamist movements and parties have developed their ideologies based on a range of factors such as the political, institutional, and historical legacies of colonialism and nation-building, Pan-Arabism and Pan-Islamism, and in response to authoritarian regimes (Cesari, 2021).

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Please cite as:

Smith, Chloe; Bachtar, Hasnan; Shakil, Kainat; Morieson, Nicholas & de Groot Heupner, Susan. (2024). "Appealing to a Religiously Defined 'the People': How Religion Was Performatively Operationalized in the 2019 and 2024 Election Campaigns of Indonesia's President-Elect." *Populism & Politics (P&P)*. European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS). April 25, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.55271/pp0034>