Do religious parties inevitably have political/electoral advantages in religious societies?

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1. Introduction

Do religious parties have an electoral advantage in winning the election easily compared to secular parties? I argue that religious parties have some electoral advantages from having religious voters as their primary supporters. However, they must have some strategies to attract median voters or other social classes outside their traditional base to win the election. They must also make a "holy" effort to maintain their morality as their religious and moral guardian in government, which is difficult in democratic politics. This essay also argues that Indonesia is an outlier in the winning trend of Islamic parties in religious societies across the globe, but further studies are needed because there is a new critical juncture. The rest of this essay will support my argument with some evidence from several countries.

2. Economic Platform is Important

Religious parties already have a traditional basis in religious society. It is an early advantage for religious parties in religious society. The next issue for them is how to attract more votes from outside their traditional voter base.

In order to attract more voters outside their traditional base, religious parties try to use economic platform strategies like providing better public goods provision for the poor or for the community outside their traditional base (Hamayotsu, 2011; Thachil, 2011, 2014). According to Thachil (2011), in India, elite-backed religious parties, such as the BJP, use social service provision as a key political strategy to attract the lower class. The BJP, which is from the upper caste, received support from lower-caste voters because of the services it gave to them. As a result, they can win the election, defeating secular parties like the Indian National

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Congress (Thachil, 2011). Chandra (2005, 2007, 2022), on the other hand, argues that the single-member district plurality (SMDP) election system in India creates what she called as "ethnic head count". Votes will look around to see if there are enough members of their ethnic/religious group to make a credible ethnic-specific bid for a legislative seat, given the electoral rules in place. If there are, they will be encouraged to vote for a political party that caters primarily to their ethnic group. However, if their subjective assessment of the size of their ethnic group exceeds the perceived electoral threshold, they are more likely to support a more broadly based party—either a non-ethnic party or an ethnic party that defines the ethnic group in a more inclusive manner. A slightly different pattern is found in the case of Lebanon. The Future Movement, sunny party aims to serve a broader range of beneficiaries, including non-Sunnis, whereas Hezbollah focuses solely on their own Shiite communities (Cammett & Issar, 2010).

However, in the case of Indonesia, Pepinsky et al. (2012) argue that Islamist party ideologies give them an advantage over non-Islamist parties when voters are unsure about the parties' economic policy platforms. They find that Islamic parties are systematically more popular than otherwise identical non-Islamic parties only in cases of economic policy uncertainty. Islamic parties never have an advantage over non-Islamic parties when respondents are aware of their economic policy platforms. In short, their findings show that Islam's political advantage is real, but it is severely limited by political parties' economic platforms and voters' understanding of them.

In addition, in European countries, economic ideology or platform is more important than religious identity. This is most evident with Christian Democratic parties in Europe, which are centre-right parties chosen by voters with little regard for their religious heritage, even though it exists and is explicitly stated in their party platforms (Pepinsky, 2022). For example, the CDU in Germany is a centre-right party. People then vote for the CDU because of their

economic platforms, such as economic liberalism (right) and other political positions on issues ranging from economic management to welfare policy to women's and minorities rights and status. People vote for the SDP (Social Democratic Party) because they believe in socialism (left).

3. Become Moderate rather than Pushing Radical Policy Agenda

If we look across the world, we will find that some religious parties win the election. For example, the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India, the Christian Democratic Union in Germany, Ennahda in Tunisia, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey, the Freedom and Justice Party in Egypt, *Jamaat el Islami*, and the Pakistan Muslim League in Pakistan are examples of religious parties with electoral political advantages. On the other hand, we also find that some Islamic parties failed to win elections in their respective religious societies, like some Islamist parties in Indonesia and Malaysia. We also find that some Islamic parties were easily repressed by state and military regimes, such as Welfare Party in Turkey in 1998, Freedom and Justice Party in Egypt in 2013, and the Islamic Salvation Front in Algeria in 1992.

In secular countries like Turkey, Indonesia, and some Arab countries, winning elections with radical agendas like implementing shariah is difficult to apply. As a result, some religious parties must adapt to the state's secular ideology to become moderate. They also became moderate parties to attract what Anothony Down (1957) called "median voters" in a rational choice strategy (Berman, 2008; Kalyvas, 2019; Karakaya & Yildirim, 2013; Tepe, 2012).

In the case of the AKP in Turkey, they transformed to become a secular party with neoliberal policies and a pro-European outlook in order to avoid being repressed by the military and simultaneously win the election. The success case of AKP in Turkey highlights what Asep Bayat (2007) calls "the end of Islamism". Bayat's notion of the end of Islamism occurs when a

group of Muslims rejects the use of violence and prefers to participate in the political system. The AKP and Erdogan have resisted using Islam as a symbol or identity since coming to power. The party and its members are ordinary politicians who are supported by the public because of their ability to serve the people as state citizens, regardless of their religious or ethnic identities. A new face of Islamism is the representation of Islamists in the political arena through a more peaceful performance and a universal language of citizenship, public service, welfare, taking care of the poor, and public provision issues (Atasoy, 2009; Hale & özbudun, 2009).

Although the AKP enjoys widespread support, some critics claim that it is undermining Turkey's secularism and has a hidden agenda to convert the country to Islamism. In Turkey, the state-religion debate is fought between two factions: Kemalists and pro-Islamic conservatives. Conservatives (AKP) are chastised by Kemalists for failing to embrace secularism and having a hidden Islamist agenda. On the other hand, conservatives argue that the Kemalists do not defend secularism but rather an anti-religious regime (Kuru, 2009, pp. 163–164). The case of Turkey shows that even though religious parties already have a traditional foundation in society as religious parties, secular parties, on the other hand, cannot be said to have a lack of traditional basis as their electoral advantages. Both religious and secular parties have their "initial capital" in polarized societies like Turkey and some other countries.

However, for religious parties, even if they win the election, it is extremely difficult to implement their religious agenda. If they try to pursue their radical policy, they will be repressed by the regime. The Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) was denied a sweeping electoral victory in Algeria in January 1992 when the military intervened and halted the country's electoral process. As a result, a bloody civil war erupted. In Belgium, on the other hand, a Catholic party was able to gain power in 1884 after winning a large electoral victory because of a religious program. Even though they had the power to change the outcome, the ruling elites

accepted it. In turn, the Catholic party did not fully implement its religious program or challenge Belgium's secularism (Kalyvas, 2000). Learning from FIS experience, many Islamist parties have become more moderate (post-Islamist) in order to avoid being repressed by a state or military coup d'état rather than to win the election (Brown, 2012; Cavatorta & Merone, 2013; El-Ghobashy, 2005; Hamid, 2014). In short, religious parties will face this dilemma: they can win, but they cannot push their radical agenda.

4. Getting Votes in Clientelism Election

Political benefits for religious parties cannot function properly in a clientelism election. Clientelism, also known as client politics, is defined as "the proffering of material goods in return for electoral support, where the criterion of distribution that the patron uses is simply: did you (will you) support me?" (Stokes, 2009, p. 605). In a clientelism election, individual benefits to voters, such as vote-buying or pork-barrel politics, are more important than religious ideology. In the case of Egypt, for example, voters are more concerned with candidates' ability to obtain economic or other types of clientelist benefits for voters via patronage than with their ideological positions (Masoud, 2008). In the case of Indonesia, Islamic parties are weak due to their limitation in funding compared to secular parties that are mostly supported by the conglomerate. Many religious leaders prefer to endorse rich candidates who can give their money as brokers (Aspinall and Berenschot, 2019, p. 134). As a result, secular parties are more likely to get more votes than religious parties. How can a religious party survive on the clientelism battlefield if they are always viewed as anti-corruption and moral defenders in politics?

Some scholars argue that religious parties' reputation for establishing good governance is what allows them to gain popular support and electoral gains outside of those segments of the population with whom they have had direct contact or share ideological affinities (Cammett

& Luong, 2014). However, having reputations as moral guards of anti-corruption and religious piety in politics is a tricky campaign for religious parties in the clientelism election. It could be a backfire for them. In the case of Indonesia's Islamist party (PKS), the scandal of corruption made this party lose the trust of their voters easily. In contrast, voters can tolerate secular "normal" parties that participated in the corruption scandal but did not promote themselves as pious or moral guardians (Fealy, 2011, pp. 343–346). Why did the religious party become a corrupt party? It can be explained by the nature of clientelism. Money is the most powerful tool for attracting voters on the clientelism battlefield. As a result, both secular and religious parties use vote buying to get more votes. If they don't, they will be left behind by other competitors that use money to attract voters. In clientelism politics, religious parties are more disadvantaged. If they are caught in corruption, their popularity will drop drastically. If they are not corrupt, then they will be defeated by rival parties who use money to gain votes.

5. Indonesia as the outlier

Norris and Inglehart (2011) argue that industrial society have been moving toward to secular orientation. Instead, Esmer and Pettersson (2009, p. 497, cited in Pepinsky, 2022) conclude that "religiosity is a major factor influencing voting behaviour throughout the Islamic world". In this regard, the effects of religion on voting behaviour in the Muslim world do not follow the predictions of the secularization thesis by Norris and Inglehart.

In contrast to Esmer and Petterson, Indonesia is the outlier. One of the interesting puzzles in the statement that "religious society gives electoral advantages to religious parties" is the case of Indonesia. In Indonesia, there is a trend of an increase in piety and religiosity, but it has a negative correlation to the increase in support for Islamist parties or Sharia law (Pepinsky et al., 2018). Although we see that Islamic parties can win in many countries in Turkey and some Arab countries after the Arab Spring, Islamic parties in Indonesia have never

won elections. There are some explanations why the increase in Islamic piety has no positive correlation to the increase in Islamic parties' votes in the election in Indonesia.

First, political parties in Indonesia have strong relations with the figures that they promote to become presidential candidates. If they have a strong candidate, it will have a coattail effect that can increase party votes. In contrast, Islamic parties in Indonesia have no strong personal candidate for president compared with secular parties that have strong candidates for president from military or other backgrounds. A study by Liddle and Mujani (2007), for example, shows the importance of leadership and party identification. In contrast, they argue that religious identity is not significant. In the recent studies by Hanan and Irvani (2022), it is also shown that Indonesian voting behaviour for voting parties and candidate choice depends on the coattail effect, where voters will choose a party based on who the party's presidential candidate is. Consequently, because there are no presidential candidates from Islamic parties, the voice of Islamic parties has stagnated.

Second, most of the secular parties use a catch-all party strategy. They also try to catch Islamist voters. In the case of the Golkar Party, for example, Baswedan (2004) finds that Golkar began building a constituency among religious Muslims in Indonesia in the late New Order period, with particular strength among religious Muslims outside of Java. Moreover, Golkar even promoted shariah law in West Java and South Sulawesi (Buehler, 2013). Some young student Islamist activists from HMI (Islamic University Student Association) continue their political careers in secular parties rather than Islamist parties (Baswedan, 2004, p.674). As a result, for Muslim voters, voting for a secular party is the same as choosing Islam. The HMI case has the same pattern as what ABIM activists did in Malaysia. They prefer to join UMNO rather than the Islamic party (PAS) like Anwar Ibrahim.

Lastly, as I previously explained, the Islamist party cannot avoid corruption scandals. As a result, voters perceive Islamic parties and secular parties as the same. Even Islamic parties are considered more hypocritical because they sell piety but are corrupt.

However, further research is needed for the Indonesian case. Most of the research on this theme was carried out in the period before the Jakarta local election. The Jakarta local election is a critical juncture that will change the trajectories of Islam and politics in Indonesia after it. Some scholars have observed that there has been an increase in Islamic populism in Indonesia after the Jakarta local election in 2017 (Barton, 2021; Setijadi, 2017). The recent research by Mujani (2020) on the Jakarta local election states that he has revised his previous findings. He confirmed that religion played a significant role in the Muslim candidate's victory. However, political economy and partisanship save the incumbent from a crushing defeat. In short, the existing comparative and Indonesian literature on the relationship between religion and voting behavior has been more thoroughly revised as a result of this critical juncture.

Conclusion

In this paper, I argue that religious parties have a cultural advantage because religious voters are their core supporters, but that in order to win elections, they must employ strategies to attract voters from other social classes. They must also make a "holy" effort to uphold their morality in government as their religious and moral guardian, which is difficult in democratic politics. This essay also claims that Indonesia is an outlier in the global trend of Islamic parties gaining power in religious societies. There is a growing trend of piety and religiosity in Indonesia, but it is negatively correlated with support for Islamist parties or Sharia law. In the case of Indonesia, however, more research is required. The majority of the research on this topic was done prior to the Jakarta local election. The Jakarta local election is a critical juncture that will alter the course of Islam and politics in Indonesia after it.

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