

## Islamic Populism and Symbolic Convergence in the 2019 Presidential Election

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### ABSTRACT

This research reveals that both candidates in the 2019 Presidential Election engaged in Islamic populist movements in an attempt to garner sympathy and increase their respective electability. The symbolic convergence of Prabowo's campaign is evident in the institutional nature of the fantasy theme woven by his team, with actions that signify the fundamentalism of Prabowo's camp. In contrast, the fantasy theme constructed by Jokowi's team is notably moderate, as exemplified by the phrase "Jokowi Loves Santri," which gave rise to the narrative that Jokowi is a moderate figure. Consequently, a shared rhetorical vision was formed, positioning Jokowi as a moderate individual, with his disseminators acting more individually, unlike Prabowo's camp, which often coalitions with Islamic mass bases.

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The presence of Islamic populism in the politics of Muslim-majority countries, including Indonesia, can be interpreted as an effort to promote religious values into the public sphere. Religion is expected to serve as a powerful tool to respond to the contradictions of global capitalism, which creates inequality and poverty. Furthermore, Islam, with its teachings of justice and equality, can be positioned as an alternative to dismantle capitalism's unfulfilled promises of equitable economic development and prosperity, and to gain control, state power must be seized.

Islamic populism, which is political, involves a coalition of classes with diverse interests, deliberately glorifying Islam as a unifying force. In Indonesia, Islam is connected to the principal beliefs of approximately 86.9% of its population. The majority demographic has the potential to be mobilized by a class alliance through issues of economic and political defeat by oligarchies, thereby igniting the collective emotions of the Muslim community.

This populist movement operates through multiple channels, including mainstream media and social media. The use of social media enables individuals not only to consume news but also to produce and disseminate ideas and support, thereby forming a shared rhetorical vision.

Rhetorical vision is a communication theory formulated by Ernest G. Bormann, which posits that communal narrative drives group cohesion and fosters the development of a shared social reality among group members. While the initial concept of symbolic convergence originated from his research on small group communication, Ernest G. Bormann argued that group consciousness can occur at any level of communication, from small groups to the public and even to the mass media. Consequently, Bormann identified symbolic convergence as a general theory of communication. (Kaid & Holtz-Bacha, 2008).

This theory and method, therefore, reinforce the importance of symbols in creating and maintaining a shared identification and a common vision of the world. (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009).

The vibrant electoral contest of the 2019 general election has indeed come to an end, but the winning strategies and dialectics of the two contenders have left their mark. An example is the strengthening of Islamic populism and the symbolic struggle to form a collective cohesion within public discourse.

In this paper, the researcher will present how Islamic populism and symbolic convergence were articulated in the 2019 presidential election contest, considering the many unexpected events that are worth bringing back to the surface in the form of a scholarly paper for analysis.

## **2. METHODS**

This state-of-the-art research contributes academically to the understanding of the government, election organizers, political parties, and the public regarding the movement of Islamic populism and symbolic convergence in the 2019 presidential election contest. Based on the researcher's study, several writings have connections and intersections with the discussed theme. For instance, Wahyudi Akmaliah reveals that Islamic populism is often used in electoral politics. (Akmaliah, 2019).

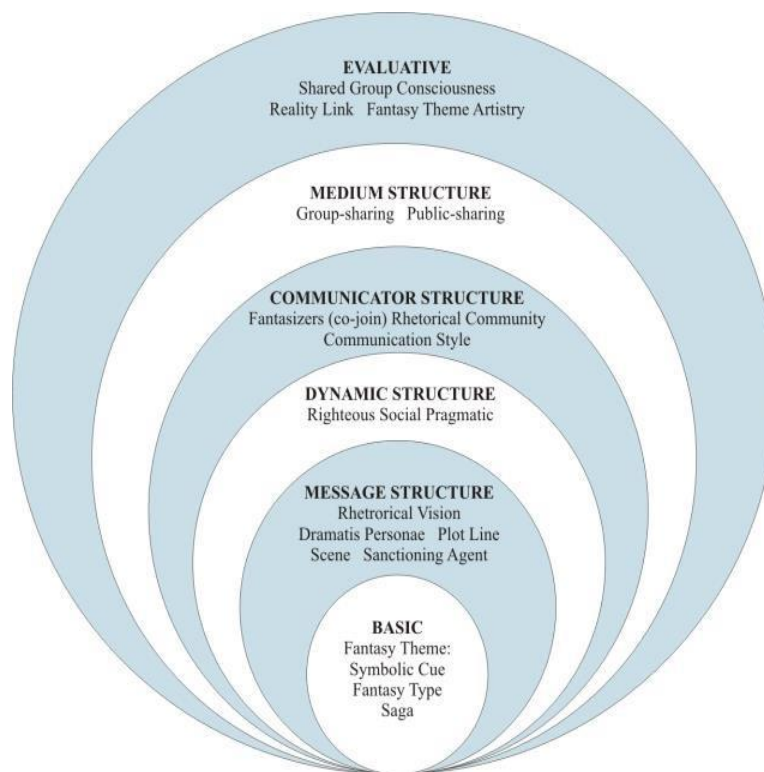
Then there is the research by Itok Dwi Kurniawan & Hanuring Ayu AP, which states that populism is related to identity politics and often becomes an issue in elections, as candidates also have their own identities. (Kurniawan & AP, 2021).

Furthermore, Gun Gun Heryanto also uses symbolic convergence analysis to examine political discussions in public spaces, which is the process of sharing a common symbolic reality through the pattern of sharing fantasy themes within communities. (Heryanto, 2015).

The research method employed in this study is a case study, which is a method for closely investigating a program, event, activity, process, or group of individuals bounded by time and activity. (Kusumastuti & Khoiron, 2019).

There are three types of case study methods: intrinsic case study, instrumental case study, and collective case study. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). The type of case study chosen for this research is the intrinsic case study. In this method, the researcher examines in detail one case or event of the phenomenon under study: Islamic populism and symbolic convergence in the 2019 presidential election.

In addition, this research uses the unit of analysis for symbolic convergence, consisting of six interrelated hierarchies within the anatomy of the symbolic convergence process. These six levels start from the basic level, including message structure, dynamic structure, communicator structure, medium structure, and evaluative level. This research also incorporates the technique of FTA (Fantasy Theme Analysis) for data analysis. (Heryanto, 2015).



**Figure 1.** *Elements of the Symbolic Convergence Process*

### **3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The communication of the Islamic populist movement during the 2019 presidential election was predominantly mediated by the media, particularly online and social media. As such, it is no surprise that numerous fantasy themes were communicated regarding the presidential candidates Prabowo Subianto and Joko Widodo in the digital realm.

The author will analyze the symbolic communication employed by both Jokowi and Prabowo's camps through these fantasy themes, describing the characters and behaviors of both Jokowi and Prabowo below, in order to understand the symbolic convergence within the Islamic populist movement of the 2019 presidential election.

#### **3.1. Prabowo's Symbolic Convergence**

As the 2019 presidential election approached, Prabowo Subianto introduced a fantasy theme, "*The New Prabowo*." He aimed to present a charming, approachable, and respectful image, listening to others. This was an effort to change the public's perception of him, moving away from the temperamental and emotional impressions that were issued in the 2014 presidential election, as they were believed to have hindered his victory. (Santoso, 2020).



**Figure 2.** *Prabowo's fashion style*

In terms of fashion and style, Prabowo Subianto, during the 2019 presidential election, often wore blue shirts, representing the working class and a dynamic style. This style is explicit, to the point, and uses straightforward language. Consequently, Prabowo Subianto is associated with emotional and heroic characteristics. Moreover, as the campaign neared its end, he and his team became more aggressive and militant. (Santoso, 2020).

Many parties, especially millennials, acknowledge that both Jokowi and Prabowo, in the 2019 presidential election, applied populist rhetoric to garner support. However, the two contenders had different fantasy theme strategies in their communication.

Prabowo conducted political communication akin to Donald Trump's political rhetoric, maximizing his appearance by using a 'post-truth' populism strategy. His goal was to defeat Jokowi's incumbent power, particularly by exposing the shortcomings of Jokowi's leadership. Millennials evaluated that in terms of political rhetoric, Prabowo's political communication

strategy surpassed Jokowi's. Political messages were conveyed clearly to the public and could be understood. Prabowo has a good command of both Indonesian and foreign languages. He communicated his political messages with effective rhetoric to the public, similar to Sukarno. (Deha, 2021).

Regarding Islamic populism, the **Fantasy Theme** articulated by Prabowo—blue shirt, dynamic style, straightforward, emotional, heroic, and an antithesis to his non-Islamist rival—was widely spread through a fantasy chain (**Fantasy Chain**) institutionally by Islamic mass groups supporting Prabowo as president in 2019, such as GNPF Ulama. These supporting groups built a narrative of Islamic populism by highlighting the un-Islamic nature of his rival at the time and articulating that Prabowo was an Islamist figure close to the ulama. This was repeatedly conveyed on various occasions, for example, on social media with hashtags like *#2019GantiPresiden*, Jokowi PKI, and others, becoming **The Type of Fantasy** for his winning group, supporters, or voters.

Subsequently, these fantasy themes developed and spread beyond the group, becoming a broad societal fantasy (**Rhetorical Vision**) that Prabowo was an Islamist figure, unlike his anti-Islamic opponent, who criminalized ulama and so forth.

### 3.2. Jokowi's Symbolic Convergence

The fantasy themes employed by Jokowi were more individualistic in nature. For instance, in terms of fashion, Jokowi created a fantasy theme: he truly had no distance from the people, especially the younger generation. Like the youth, he attributed himself to a casual and sociable fashion style and maintained this throughout the 2019 presidential campaign.



**Figure 3.** *Jokowi's fashion style*

The fantasy theme symbolized by Jokowi created a fantasy chain among the public, describing him as having an equalitarian style characterized by being down-to-earth and inclusive. Joko Widodo became a symbolic figure who always listens, cares, loves, defends, and enjoys mingling with people. He is identified with a calm and well-organized style. Furthermore, he highlighted the fantasy theme through activities with his family. (Santoso, 2020).

The fundamental aspect that can be highlighted from the fantasy theme articulated by Jokowi within the Islamic populism movement is Jokowi's non-anti-Islamic communication, which surfaced to create a fantasy chain among the public. Jokowi and his National Campaign Team (NCT) then busied themselves with strategies to bring Jokowi closer to the Muslim community. According to a survey by Charta Politica, the issue of Jokowi being anti-Islamic significantly impacted the public's motivation to vote for Jokowi. In various surveys, the issue of Jokowi being anti-Islamic indeed strengthened and became a weapon for political opponents to attack him. This certainly became a major problem, prompting Jokowi to consider how to address the issue, especially since the largest population in Indonesia is Muslim. (Qorib & Saleh, 2020).

In the 2019 presidential election, the dynamics of political communication within Jokowi's Islamic populism movement were highly unpredictable for many, particularly the selection of Ma'ruf Amin as his vice presidential candidate. This was a significant step as a consequence of the accumulation of political communication involving Islamic groups in Indonesia, especially more fundamentalist Islamic groups, to depict the rhetorical vision regarding the anti-Islam accusations against him.

Ma'ruf Amin's status as one of Indonesia's most prominent ulama was at least an attraction in winning the votes of students (traditionalist Muslims) and pesantren (Islamic boarding schools). Jokowi understood well that the Muslim vote would determine his victory in the 2019 presidential election. In recent years, the Islamic movement has been significant and can be said to have a strong influence on the nation's political landscape. Moreover, Ma'ruf Amin's management track record in political organizations, such as NU (Nahdlatul Ulama) and his position as the head of MUI (Indonesian Ulema Council), added value for Muslim voters when they wanted to choose a leader.

The appointment of Ma'ruf Amin as the vice presidential candidate was one step to securing the votes of the Muslim community, especially those affiliated with or sympathetic to fundamentalist Islamic movements during Joko Widodo's first term, which strengthened in recent years. In addition, the selection of Ma'ruf Amin was also considered an appropriate move to strengthen Jokowi against a number of black campaigns, such as the anti-Islam issue attributed to him.

With the status of the majority of voters, namely the Muslim community, ulama plays a significant role in forming fantasy themes to create a fantasy chain in the public sphere because ulama essentially means "learned individuals" who possess extensive knowledge. (Mattulada, 1983). Although the term ulama is often used for political purposes, its appeal for political communication is still in vogue in Indonesia. Amidst the surge of religious conservatism in Indonesia in recent years, Ma'ruf Amin, framed as an ulama, is undoubtedly very influential in the political decision-making process among the Indonesian public. (Sanusi & Gumilar, 2019).

Therefore, the author can conclude that the model of symbolic convergence of Jokowi in his Islamic populism movement is more individualistic, based on the following: *first*, Jokowi's **Fantasy Theme** is to respond to the anti-Islam accusations attributed to him by highlighting an equalitarian style, characterized by being down-to-earth and inclusive (*blusukan*).

*Second*, these fantasy themes eventually elicited responses from communication participants (**Fantasy Chain**), increasing the intensity and enthusiasm of participants in sharing fantasies (shared group consciousness), and taking on an individual nature through the selection of KH. Ma'ruf Amin as his vice presidential candidate in response to accusations against him as an anti-Islamic figure and criminalizing ulama.

*Third*, the equalitarian style, *blusukan*, and the selection of Ma'ruf Amin became Jokowi's fantasy themes and those of his voter groups, continuously spreading through various opportunities and media platforms, thus becoming a **Fantasy Type**.

*Fourth*, these fantasy themes subsequently developed and spread beyond the group that initially developed the fantasies, forming a sort of rhetorical community or **Rhetorical Vision**.

### 3.3. Analysis Of Symbolic Convergence

To further understand the symbolic communication process between Jokowi and Prabowo, the author analyzes symbolic convergence, which consists of six interrelated hierarchies. These include the basic structure, message structure, dynamic structure, communicator structure, medium structure, and evaluative level.

#### a. Basic Structure

The basic structure is part of the community's consciousness through the dynamic process of sharing in achieving an individual's or group's goals. It demonstrates a symbolic reality containing meaning, emotions, and motives for action for each member.

The basic structure in the symbolic convergence of Jokowi refers to four aspects: 1) embracing the moderate Islamic faction; 2) conducting political safaris to numerous *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools); 3) establishing October 22nd as National Santri Day; and 4) choosing an ulama (Ma'ruf Amin) as his vice presidential candidate.

The basic structure in the symbolic convergence of Prabowo includes: 1) embracing the fundamentalist Islamic faction; 2) using Islamic issues to form coalitions with Islamic mass bases such as PA 212, GNPf-MUI, FPI; 3) indoctrinating the public about the weaknesses of the first-ranked presidential candidate (Jokowi) in the context of Islam; and 4) seeking support from prominent ulama and Islamic organizations.

#### b. Message Structure

If mapped from various news articles, writings, or comments uploaded by netizen supporters of both presidential candidates on various social media platforms, their rhetorical visions can be divided into five categories: *first*, the issue of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) accused by Prabowo's camp against Jokowi. *Second*, the issue of Jokowi being a foreign stooge. *Third*, the matter of foreign labor from China. *Fourth* the issue of criminalizing ulama. *Fifth*, anti-Islam sentiments. As for Jokowi and his camp, they created more rhetorical visions by refuting the accusations directed at him.

#### c. Dynamic Structure

It can be argued that, in general, within the dynamic structure of the Islamic populism movement during the 2019 presidential election, both Jokowi and Prabowo exhibited a common thread in their efforts to garner votes or win the electoral competition.

d. Communicator Structure

If one observes the typology of Islamic populism in the 2019 presidential election, there are two communicator structures: disseminators (Jokowi and Prabowo themselves, who directly communicate the rhetorical visions) and propagandists. The propagandists from Prabowo's camp spread the rhetorical visions about the existence of Jokowi's previous government and turn them into daily issues. They share data, analysis, comments, and links regarding the issues accused against Jokowi. Meanwhile, propagandists from Jokowi's camp use similar techniques, such as highlighting Prabowo's perceived weaknesses in terms of Islam. These propaganda techniques are known as name-calling or giving derogatory labels. (Heryanto, 2015).

e. Medium Structure

Both Prabowo and Jokowi share a similarity in that they fall into group-sharing (shared group consciousness), rather than public sharing. This is because they share narratives, emotions, meanings, and so forth, which are only done by those who are already part of their rhetorical community or among their volunteers and supporters. This is evident when the presidential debate takes place, as issues of Islamic populism are not directly accused against their opponents in front of the public, but these issues of Islamic populism develop into public consumption, intertwined with the fantasies of each group of supporters. However, if analyzed more deeply, there is a striking difference, namely that Prabowo often attracts the Islamic mass base to become his medium structure, while Jokowi focuses on his selection of Ma'ruf Amin as a representation of his strong and moderate Islamic identity.

f. Evaluative Structure

Three aspects will be discussed in the evaluative structure: shared group consciousness, reality link, and fantasy theme artistry. The term "shared group consciousness" is an evaluation used to re-examine the process of symbolic convergence. In the shared group consciousness of both Jokowi and Prabowo's camps, there is sufficient discourse awareness or the building of discursive consciousness. Meanwhile, the reality link evaluation is not very contextual; the accusations and issues of Islamic populism from both Jokowi and Prabowo's camps cannot all be validated in reality.

In addition, there is another component of the evaluative structure, which is Fantasy Theme Artistry. This involves an assessment of rhetorical creativity or the innovative competitive value of the fantasy theme. In conclusion, the rhetorical creativity built by both Prabowo and Jokowi tends to involve a lot of repetition between one issue and another or from one supporter to another within the same group, and the weakest aspect in this context is the strength of the data. Many writings about issues of Islamic populism that are spread are based on common sense.

Therefore, this research will conclude the symbolic convergence style of both Jokowi and Prabowo in the Islamic populism movement during the 2019 presidential election through the form of Figure 4 below.



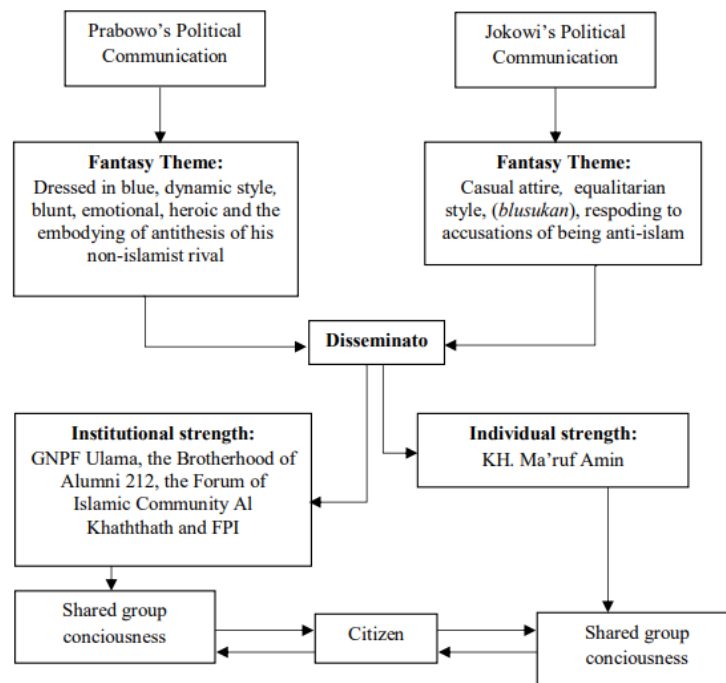


Figure 4. Symbolic convergence of jokowi and prabowo's populism

## CONCLUSION

Prabowo's Islamic populism movement is depicted by his embrace of the fundamentalist Islamic faction and some moderate circles. Using Islamic issues to form coalitions with Islamic mass bases such as PA 212, GNPf-MUI, and FPI and indoctrinating his loyalists and the general public about the weaknesses of the first presidential candidate in the context of Islam. Thus, Prabowo's symbolic convergence is more fundamentalist and institutional in nature.

On the other hand, Jokowi's Islamic populism movement is reflected in his embrace of the moderate Islamic faction and a small group of conservatives. Political safaris to Islamic boarding schools, establishing October 22nd as National Santri Day, and choosing KH. Ma'ruf Amin, as his vice presidential candidate, is a symbol of a moderate cleric, making Jokowi's symbolic convergence moderate and individualistic.

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