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Contested Trajectories of Political Islam Post-Islamist Reform and the Strategic Turn to Religious Populism

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Abstrak
Islamisme sebagai ideologi politik telah mengalami transformasi konseptual yang signifikan dalam sejarah modern dunia Muslim. Dari proyek skripturalis dan konfrontatif pada fase awal yang bertujuan menegakkan tatanan Islam, banyak gerakan Islamis bergeser menuju orientasi yang lebih moderat, partisipatoris, dan demokratis yang kemudian diteorisasikan sebagai post-Islamisme. Dengan bertumpu pada teori post-Islamisme dan teori populisme, artikel ini mengembangkan sebuah kerangka transformasi konseptual untuk melacak bagaimana Islam politik bergerak dari Islamisme ideologis menuju reformasi post-Islamis dan, secara paradoksal, menuju populisme agama yang strategis. Penelitian ini mempertanyakan bagaimana trajektori tersebut membentuk ulang hubungan antara cita-cita Islam, demokrasi, dan pluralisme dalam politik Muslim kontemporer. Secara metodologis, studi ini menggunakan penelitian kualitatif berbasis literatur dan analisis wacana ideologis komparatif pada sejumlah negara dengan mayoritas penduduk Muslim, termasuk Iran, Mesir, Turki, Tunisia, dan Indonesia. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa post-Islamisme menawarkan sintesis antara nilai-nilai Islam dan prinsip-prinsip demokrasi, namun secara bersamaan membuka peluang bagi populisme agama yang menginstrumentalisasi simbol-simbol Islam, menyederhanakan batas-batas moral antara "umat" dan "elit", serta mempersempit ruang pluralisme. Secara konseptual, artikel ini mengajukan sebuah lensa analitis terpadu untuk memahami evolusi yang saling bertautan antara ideologi Islam politik dan populisme agama dalam lanskap demokrasi global yang semakin kompleks.
Kata kunci: Islamisme, Post-Islamisme, Populisme Agama; Transformasi Konseptual

Abstract
Islamism, as a political ideology, has undergone significant conceptual transformation within the modern history of the Muslim world. From an early scripturalist and confrontational project aimed at establishing an Islamic order, many Islamist movements have shifted toward more moderate, participatory, and democratic trajectories, theorized as post-Islamism. Drawing on post-Islamism and populism theory, this article develops a conceptual-transformation framework to trace how political Islam moves from ideological Islamism to post-Islamist reform and, paradoxically, to strategic religious populism. The research asks how this trajectory reshapes the relationship between Islamic ideals, democracy, and pluralism in contemporary Muslim politics. Methodologically, it employs qualitative literature-based research and comparative ideological discourse analysis across several Muslim-majority countries, including Iran, Egypt, Turkey, Tunisia, and Indonesia. The findings suggest that post-Islamism offers a synthesis between Islamic values and democratic principles yet simultaneously opens opportunities for religious populism that instrumentalizes Islamic symbols, simplifies moral boundaries between "ummah" and "elite," and narrows pluralist space. Conceptually, the article proposes an integrated analytical lens for understanding the intertwined evolution of political Islamic ideology and religious populism in an increasingly complex global democratic landscape.
Keywords: Islamism, Post-Islamism, Religious Populism, Conceptual Transformation

Introduction

In the last two decades, Islamic political discourse has undergone significant conceptual transformation in responding to global and national changes such as democratization, globalization, and the rise of identity politics. Within this shifting landscape, the ideology of Islamism—originally formulated in the early twentieth century as a response to colonialism and secularism—has itself changed. From a largely ideological, scripturalist, and revolutionary project aimed at establishing an Islamic order, many Islamist movements have moved towards more participatory, moderate, and accommodative trajectories. This shift, which Asef Bayat theorizes as post-Islamism, involves attempts to synthesize Islamic values with democratic principles such as deliberation, civil rights, and pluralism (Bayat, 2013).

At the same time, a wave of religious populism has emerged as a powerful political strategy in many Muslim-majority contexts. Religious populism mobilizes Islamic symbols, moral vocabularies, and sentiments to construct a binary opposition between a virtuous "people" (ummah) and a corrupt "elite", and to rally mass support in electoral contests. In its more radical form, this strategy not only polarizes the public sphere but also risks hollowing out substantive democracy and weakening the ethos of pluralism by reducing complex political conflicts to moralized identity battles.

Although a substantial body of scholarship has examined the transformation of Islamism into post-Islamism (Esposito & Voll, 1996; Rane, 2010; Roy, 2004) and another strand has analyzed the emergence of religious populism in contemporary politics (Beuter et al., 2023; Hadiz, 2016; Kaltwasser et al., 2017), these two debates are still often treated separately. Much of the literature on Islamism remains focused either on Islamist extremism or on the formal success of Islamic political actors in democratic systems, without tracing in detail the ideological reconfigurations that accompany these processes. Conversely, studies of religious populism are frequently confined to case-specific analyses that do not sufficiently engage with the longer historical and ideological trajectories of Islamist movements. In practice, however, contemporary Islamic political actors frequently combine post-Islamist reformist vocabularies with opportunistic populist strategies. Against this backdrop, the goal of this article is to develop a synthetic conceptual-transformation framework that maps how ideological Islamism evolves into post-Islamism and how, in turn, post-Islamist projects become entangled with religious populism in various Muslim-majority settings.

With this gap in mind, this article has two main objectives. First, to map the evolution of Islamist ideology toward post-Islamism; and second, to analyze how religious populism emerges as a new strategy in contemporary Muslim politics. Analytically, the study adopts a comparative-contextual, cross-country design that places five Muslim-majority settings side by side. The comparison is structured around three main analytical axes: (1) the trajectories from ideological Islamism to post-Islamist

reform; (2) the forms and intensity of religious populist appeals; and (3) their implications for democratic quality and pluralist arrangements.

Guided by this design, the study addresses the following research questions: How has the ideology of Islamism evolved into post-Islamism in selected Muslim-majority countries? In what ways and under what conditions do post-Islamist actors adopt religious populist strategies? And how does this trajectory reshape the relationship between Islamic ideals, democracy, and pluralism in contemporary Muslim politics? The scientific contribution of this article lies in its attempt to bridge two largely separate strands of debate, namely post-Islamism and on religious populism, and to propose a new framework for understanding the ideological and democratic challenges faced by Muslims in an era of increasingly emotional and identitarian electoral politics.

This article departs from that separation by arguing that contemporary religious populism in the Muslim world is better understood as a paradoxical outgrowth of the post-Islamist project itself. It shows how the very vocabularies that post-Islamism normalized are increasingly re-coded into more rhetorical, emotional, and mobilizing forms that commodify Islamic narratives. Political actors who once embodied moderate and inclusive Islam can, under electoral pressure, adopt strategies that simplify the identity of the ummah and oppose it to an undifferentiated elite or "inauthentic" others, thereby distorting post-Islamism's normative aspirations. By reading religious populism not as the antithesis but as a distorted continuation of post-Islamism, the article fills a gap in the literature and offers a new analytical lens for understanding how a project framed as a synthesis of faith and freedom can slide into boundary-making, identity-driven electoral politics.

Theoretical Framework

This study focuses on three key concepts: Islamism, post-Islamism, and religious populism, treated as ideal-typical configurations of contemporary political Islam. For analytical purposes, Islamism is operationalized as discourses and projects that (1)

explicitly prioritize the implementation of sharīʿa or an Islamic legal order as the primary political goal (Roy, 2007) and (2) link political legitimacy to conformity with that order (Ṭībī, 2012). Post-Islamism refers to discourses that (1) accept electoral democracy and constitutionalism, (2) foreground citizenship, pluralism, and rights (Bayat, 2013), and (3) reframe Islamic reference primarily as an ethical and value-based resource rather than a detailed legal blueprint (Hefner, 2000). Religious populism is defined as discourses and strategies that (1) construct a moralized opposition between a "true Muslim people" and a corrupt elite or religiously inauthentic out-groups, (2) rely heavily on Islamic symbols to legitimize this boundary, and (3) mobilize emotions and identity grievances more than substantive policy argument (Beuter et al., 2023; Hadiz, 2016).

On this basis, the article develops a conceptual-transformation framework that reads the relationship between the three not as fixed stages, but as shifting re-articulations within a common ideological field. Islamist projects can be reworked into post-Islamist vocabularies, and these in turn can be appropriated by religious populist actors for electoral gain. This framework guides the subsequent analysis of how ideas about sharīʿa, democracy, and "the people" are rearranged across different contexts.

Method

Methodologically, the study employs a qualitative, library-based design centered on ideological discourse analysis and conceptual interpretation. The corpus consists of secondary literature that are discussed in major scholarly works. The goal is to reconstruct trajectories of ideas and strategies, not to generate statistical generalizations.

In line with its comparative-contextual orientation, the article examines five Muslim-majority countries—Iran, Egypt, Turkey, Tunisia, and Indonesia. The unit of analysis is the ideological discourse of movements, parties, and leaders. Comparison is organized along three axes: (1) trajectories from ideological Islamism toward post-Islamist reformulations; (2) the forms and intensity of religious populist appeals; and (3)

the implications of these configurations for democratic quality and pluralist arrangements. Contextual variables—such as colonial legacies, regime type, the role of the military, and local religious cultures—are treated as conditioning factors that shape how the same concepts are articulated differently across cases. This design clarifies how the operational definitions above work in practice and provides the basis for the article's cross-country analysis.

Result and Discussion

Islamism and Its Historical Context

The term Islamism generally refers to an understanding that turns Islam into a political ideology and the basis of collective identity for governing state and society (Esposito, 1998). Asef Bayat defines Islamism as "an ideology and movement that seeks to establish an 'Islamic order' in Muslim societies" (Bayat, 2013, p. 6). In this sense, Islamists believe that Islam is not only a private religion, but also a political, legal, and social system (Roy, 2004). The ideal state is an Islamic state that formally implements Islamic law. The orientation toward seizing state power is central, as Islamists assume that political control enables a top-down formation of an Islamic society (Ṭībī, 2012). Their main priority is to build an ideologically defined community based on Islam, while issues such as social justice or prosperity are often presumed to follow once the Islamic order is established (Ayoob, 2010).

Islamism did not emerge in a vacuum. Its roots can be traced to various Islamic renewal movements since the nineteenth century (Hourani, 1983). Historically, the rise of Islamism is inseparable from the context of modernity and colonialism. From the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, the Muslim world experienced profound shocks due to Western military, economic, and cultural penetration. Western modernity with its science, secularization, and nation-state challenged traditional orders (Lapidus, 2012), while colonialism generated a deep collective trauma as most Muslim-majority lands came under European rule. This fostered a narrative of decline of the ummah after

classical Islamic glory (Keddie & Algar, 2020). Many Muslim intellectuals framed Western colonialism as the root of Muslim suffering, from poverty to political subordination (Zubaida, 2005). In this context, the idea of a political Islamic revival found momentum. Anti-colonial resistance was often framed as jihad to defend the ummah (Vatikiotis, 1987). The experience of colonialism thus left a strong imprint on modern Islamist imaginations, as Muslims must rise against foreign domination to restore Islamic glory (Kepel, 2002). This anti-colonial pattern of resistance flowed into twentieth-century Islamist ideology, producing a strong suspicion of Western influence and of local secular governments seen as Western puppets (Ṭībī, 2012).

The nineteenth-century modernist reform movement further shaped this trajectory. Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh, and Rashid Rida responded to modernity by returning to the "purity" of Islamic teachings while selectively adopting Western science and administrative techniques (Hourani, 1983). They emphasized rational inquiry and reinterpretation of religious texts so that Islam could address contemporary challenges. Al-Afghani's pan-Islamism and Abduh's call for ijtihad cultivated a new discourse that Islam must rise to meet the times (Lapidus, 2012). The next generation, including Hasan al-Banna and Abul A'la Maududi, combined reformist impulses with the explicit goal of establishing an Islamic state (Mitchell & Voll, 1993; Nasr, 2004). Al-Banna founded the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt (1928) to counter colonial influence and moral decline through da'wa and socio-political activism, while Maududi founded Jamaat-e-Islami in British India (1941) with a doctrine of an Islamic state governed by Divine sovereignty. Both are widely regarded as pioneers of Islamism, calling for *syumūliyyat al-Islām* (the totality of Islam) and insisting that Islam regulates all aspects of life, obliging Muslims to uphold the supremacy of Divine law on earth (Roy, 2004).

Islamism as a political ideology is marked by characteristic goals, strategies, and state visions. The core objective is to realize a social and political order considered "Islamic," often understood as comprehensive implementation of Islamic law (Ayoob,

2010). Classic slogans such as *al-Islām huwa al-ḥall* (Islam is the solution) and *al-Islām dīn wa dawlah* (Islam is both religion and state) encapsulate the belief that there should be no separation between religious and political authority; Islam is conceived as an all-encompassing system (Roy, 2007). In other words, Islamism assumes that state laws and institutions must be aligned with Islamic teachings as Islamists interpret them (Esposito, 2013). Depending on context, its concrete goals range from establishing a formal Islamic state, implementing sharia as positive law, to re-establishing a transnational Caliphate (Fuller, 2003).

To pursue these goals, Islamist movements develop distinctive da'wa-political strategies. The formula "da'wa and politics" captures the pattern whereby religious, educational, and social missions gradually evolve into political power (Mitchell & Voll, 1993). The Muslim Brotherhood, for instance, began as a movement for religious study, charity, and moral reform before creating formal political structures. This bottom-up approach aims to build a pious and disciplined Muslim base so that society is "Islamized from below". The concept of *tarbiyah* (cadre formation) is central here. Individuals, then families and communities, are shaped before the state is targeted. Hasan al-Banna articulated a tiered strategy, from *fardiyyah* (individual) and *ijtimā'iyyah* (societal) da'wa to political engagement once networks are consolidated (Mitchell & Voll, 1993). In this way, Islamism seeks to Islamize society as a prelude to Islamizing the state (Bayat, 2013).

Therefore, Islamism was born from a combination of disappointment with foreign domination, anxiety over Western-style social change, and an internal drive for Islamic renewal (Esposito & Voll, 1996). It is a distinctly modern product: while rhetorically rejecting "the West," Islamist movements employ modern organizational forms, media, and electoral politics to advance their project (Roy, 2004). Over time, Islamism diversified into a broad spectrum, from parliamentary movements to revolutionary jihadist groups; yet all share a basic vision by establishing Islamic order in state and society as a response to the crises of modernity (Ayoob, 2010).

From the perspective of conceptual transformation, the above findings position Islamism as the initial configuration of contemporary political Islam. Islamism is characterized by (1) a state-centric goal of establishing an Islamic order; (2) a strong emphasis on sharia as formal positive law; (3) a da'wa-to-politics strategy that seeks societal Islamization as a route to state power; and (4) a defensive posture vis-à-vis Western modernity rooted in anti-colonial experiences. These dimensions provide the baseline against which later post-Islamist reformulations and religious populist re-articulations are compared in the following sub-sections.

To make this analytical move more explicit, Table 1 below summarizes how the framework distinguishes Islamism from post-Islamism and religious populism along several core dimensions. The present sub-section empirically grounds the Islamism column; the subsequent sub-sections will fill in and interpret the post-Islamism and religious populism columns.

Table 1. Ideal-type configurations in the conceptual-transformation framework

Dimension	Islamism (baseline)	Post-Islamism	Religious populism
Core political goal	Establish Islamic order/Islamic state; sharia as state law	Democratize and reform; good governance within Islamic reference	Win elections; protect "true believers" from corrupt elites
Conception of sharia	Comprehensive legal code for state and society	Ethical–value reference compatible with rights and pluralism	Symbolic–moral resource to mark in-group vs out-group
Subject of change	Islamist vanguard seizing/reshaping the state	Citizens and movements negotiating within democratic institutions	"The people" (ummah) mobilized against "the elite"
View of democracy & pluralism	Often instrumental or conditional	Affirmed as norm; integrated with Islamic discourse	Accepted tactically; frequently undermined by polarizing rhetoric
Style of mobilization	Programmatic, organization-based, cadre-oriented	Issue-based, reformist, coalition-oriented	Emotional, identity-driven, anti-elite rhetoric

This table clarifies how the characteristics of Islamism identified in this sub-section function as the starting point of an evolving ideological field in which post-Islamism and religious populism emerge as subsequent, and sometimes overlapping, re-articulations.

Ideological Transformation of Islamism

Over time, many Islamist movements began to move from a revolutionary approach toward participatory or reformist strategies (Esposito, 2013). In the 1970s and 1980s, repression by authoritarian regimes in the Middle East pushed some factions toward violence and militant jihad, including transnational jihadist networks that grew after the Afghan war of the 1980s (Cliteur, 2021). These confrontational strategies produced bloody conflicts and largely failed in the face of harsh state responses. The failure of violent Islamism paved the way for strategic re-evaluation. Entering the early twenty-first century, mainstream Islamist movements increasingly adopted non-violent paths and sought participation in legal political processes (Volpi & Stein, 2015). Many Brotherhood-inspired groups embraced electoral democracy and party competition as vehicles for their goals, a shift often interpreted through the "inclusion–moderation" hypothesis: when radical movements are incorporated into formal politics, they tend to moderate and, conversely, legal inclusion reduces incentives for extremism (Esposito et al., 2016). These developments mark a first axis of change: a move from a revolutionary, confrontation-oriented configuration of Islamism toward a more post-Islamist pattern that normalizes democratic participation while retaining Islamic reference.

This strategic evolution is visible in the transformation of several Islamist movements into official political parties after episodes of the Arab Spring by emphasizing parliamentary struggle and elections rather than armed revolution (Zherlitsyna, 2022). In many cases, Islamist activists argue that the principle of *shūrā* (deliberation) in Islamic tradition is compatible with democracy, thus legitimizing political participation in Islamic terms (Pierret, 2013). Roy suggests that after the Arab Spring, Islamism and democracy have become "interdependent". Islamists need elections to secure legitimacy, and democracy in many Muslim-majority countries struggles to stabilize without the inclusion of mainstream Islamist actors (Roy, 2007). Conceptually, this indicates that Islamist projects are no longer framed solely as alternatives to democracy but are increasingly re-articulated within democratic institutions.

At the same time, Islamism is not monolithic; it encompasses a spectrum from highly conservative to more progressive tendencies. Graham E. Fuller distinguishes between conservative "guardians of tradition" and more reformist "pioneers of change" such as the Muslim Brotherhood (Fuller, 2003). The conservative camp tends to be scripturalist and focused on purification (*tajdīd*) without compromise with modern values, whereas the progressive camp is more pragmatic and willing to adapt Islamic teachings to contemporary realities (Hashmi, 2002). This contrast is evident in debates over sharia implementation. Formalist currents emphasize legal-formal enforcement as primary indicators of success. Ethical–substantive currents, by contrast, stress the moral purposes (*maqāṣid*) of sharia over its rigid legal form, arguing that Islamic values can be realized through formats compatible with democracy and human rights (Alnahari et al., 2018). These internal debates reveal a second axis of conceptual transformation: from a state-centric, legal-formalist understanding of sharia toward more ethical-substantive readings that can be reconciled with pluralist democracy.

These dynamics are reflected in the evolution of Islamist party platforms. In the 2000s, some Islamic parties explicitly abandoned the agenda of formalizing sharia and shifted toward governance and social-justice issues, often read as a sign of post-Islamism (Rane, 2010). Ḥizb an-Nahḍah in Tunisia, for example, declared that it no longer pursued a formal "Islamic state" but prioritized "Muslim democracy", highlighting Islamic ethical values in public policy (Ayoob, 2010). This stance contrasts sharply with conservative formations such as the National Congress Party in Sudan in the 1980s–1990s, which formalized sharia with the backing of conservative regimes. The coexistence of these contrasting trajectories illustrates that Islamism has become an internally differentiated field, in which some actors move decisively toward post-Islamist reformism while others double down on formalist projects. These differences show how the same ideological language ("Islamic state," "sharia," "Islamic values") can be re-configured into divergent political projects.

Globalization and modernity further drive the transformation of Islamism. The diffusion of ideas such as the nation-state, democracy, human rights, and gender equality has compelled Islamist movements to revise their agendas to remain relevant (Hasan, 2011). Historically, Islamism emerged as an antithesis to Western hegemony, yet it is itself a modern product, employing parties, mass organizations, and twentieth-century ideological rhetoric (Pioppi, 2004). In the post-Cold War era, waves of political liberalization opened electoral opportunities in many Muslim countries. In response, Islamists have adapted their ideology to electoral democracy, accepting the nation-state and democratic procedures at least procedurally. They frame participation in terms of *shūrā* and adopt rhetorics of good governance, social justice, and universal rights (Mecham & Hwang, 2014). Roy notes that after 2011, mainstream Islamism was "redefined by a new political landscape" that required competition within democratic frameworks, much as the Catholic Church eventually accommodated democracy while retaining internal hierarchy (Roy, 2012). Therefore, globalization acts as a contextual driver pushes Islamist actors along the spectrum from classical Islamism to post-Islamism, though not in a uniform or irreversible manner.

At the same time, global norms of pluralism and minority rights expose the doctrinal limits of classical Islamism. The ideal of an Islamic state sits uneasily with equal citizenship for non-Muslims. International and domestic debates on women's and minority rights have pushed some Islamist thinkers to reinterpret texts, allowing, for example, women's political leadership or revising family laws. Progress has been uneven and often lags political adaptation (Haq, 2019; Rane, 2010). Overall, globalization and modernity have forced Islamists into ongoing ideological adjustments by maintaining commitment to sharia while interpreting it in more contextual and inclusive ways, amid intense internal disputes about balancing religious puritanism and pluralistic social realities.

In summary, the ideological transformation of Islamism over the past century reveals complex but identifiable trajectories: from revolutionary confrontation to

electoral participation, from legal-formalist understandings of sharia to more ethical–substantive readings, and from a relatively unified project to a differentiated field of positions. These findings support our central claim that contemporary Islamism is best understood as a shifting configuration within a broader conceptual continuum that includes post-Islamism. They also provide the necessary background for the next stage of analysis, in which the same repertoire of Islamic symbols and democratic practices can be re-articulated in the form of religious populism.

Transition from Islamism to Post-Islamism

The term post-Islamism is central to this article's conceptual-transformation framework. Rather than simply denoting a chronological "after Islamism," it signals a qualitative rearticulation of the Islamist project once its limits and contradictions are exposed (Bayat, 2013). Bayat argues that post-Islamism inverts the basic logic of Islamism: where Islamism foregrounds state-enforced duties and religious obligation, post-Islamism foregrounds citizens' rights and individual choice while retaining Islamic inspiration (Bayat, 2007, 2010). The project is synthetic rather than substitutional. It seeks to "marry Islam with individual freedom and democracy, faith with human rights, sharia with free choice". Theoretically, then, post-Islamism is best understood not as the abandonment of Islamic politics, but as an attempt to reconfigure Islamism along new normative axes—rights, pluralism, and democratic procedures—as an "alternative modernity" shaped by Islamic ethics rather than secular nationalism (Roy, 2012).

Empirically, this shift is driven by the disappointing performance or internal saturation of Islamist experiments. Iranian Revolution of 1979 can be seen as a paradigmatic example: initially celebrated as the triumph of Islamism, it soon revealed the costs of a state-centric religious project. By the late 1980s, especially after Khomeini's death, social demands coalesced around democracy, civil rights, gender equality, and relaxation of state religious control (Dokhanchi, 2020). The election of Mohammad Khatami in 1997 expressed this post-Islamist turn: not a rejection of Islam, but a

reorientation toward civil society, rule of law, and a more negotiated religion–state relationship. Theoretically, Iran illustrates how an Islamist "solution" can generate a countermovement from within its own social base, pushing the ideological configuration along the continuum from Islamism toward post-Islamism.

Turkey provides another key site for interpreting this transformation. The closure of the Refah Party under secular pressure in the 1990s forced its cadres to revise their repertoire. The founding of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) marked a shift from an explicit Islamist platform toward "conservative democracy" (Knudsen & Zabīdī, 2014). Bayat notes that Turkish Islamists gradually abandoned the view of Islam as a totalizing ideology that must regulate every aspect of life through an Islamic state (Bayat, 2010). Instead, they pursued a modern nation-state in which pious Muslims would enjoy full citizenship without discrimination. Initially, the AKP framed its project in terms of deepening democracy, pluralism, and even a form of secularism understood as state neutrality vis-à-vis religion (Tomac, 2020). This early AKP represented a post-Islamist configuration: Islamic ethical references were retained, but the primary language became that of economic development, EU accession, and democratic reform. Subsequent authoritarian regression does not negate this earlier moment; rather, it underscores the contingency and reversibility of post-Islamist trajectories within the broader conceptual field.

Beyond Iran and Turkey, elements of post-Islamism appear across different contexts. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood's participation in electoral politics after the 2011 Arab Spring embodied an attempt to negotiate between Islamist identity and democratic competition. In Tunisia, Ennahda's self-redefinition from "Islamist" to "Muslim democrat" and its acceptance of a formally neutral, non-theocratic state signaled an explicit move toward a civil state grounded in citizens' consent while articulating Islamic values socially and culturally (Zherlitsyna, 2022). In Indonesia, where the state is not formally Islamic, parties such as the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) have, since the post-1998 reform era, been compelled to recalibrate by downplaying calls for

sharia formalization and foregrounding issues like good governance, anti-corruption, and moral education (Hefner, 2011; Hoesterey, 2013). These cases, although institutionally diverse, point to a common pattern, as Islamic reference is re-embedded within discourses of citizenship, democracy, and rights.

The contrast between Islamism and post-Islamism can therefore be interpreted conceptually rather than only descriptively. Islamism begins from a utopian premise—"Islam is the solution"—often oriented toward an idealized past and anchored in state-centered enforcement of duties (Bayat, 2013). Post-Islamism starts from plural, conflict-ridden modern reality; it is inherently pragmatic, accepting that no single religious formula can exhaustively organize public life (Zherlitsyna, 2022). In Islamist thought, the state is typically the main instrument for imposing Islamic norms; in post-Islamist thought, the state is reconceived as a civil or neutral arena within which Islamic values can compete democratically alongside other moral visions (Hefner, 2011). Theoretically, this signals a displacement of the locus of normativity from the state to the citizen: Islamic commitments are mediated through rights, consent, and public deliberation rather than through automatic legal formalization.

At the same time, post-Islamism does not simply erase Islamism. Bayat emphasizes its hybridity and eclectism: many actors and constituencies combine Islamist and post-Islamist discourses, endorsing, for example, both sharia-based rhetoric and democratic norms, both conservative morality and rights-language. Post-Islamism should therefore be read as a reconfiguration within the same ideological field, not as a clean break. Classical Islamist slogans and imaginaries persist, but they are refracted through new grammars of citizenship, civil state, and pluralism. This has important implications. While post-Islamism opens space for non-Muslim and intra-Muslim pluralism—guaranteeing minorities' freedoms and discouraging sectarianism, it also leaves unresolved tensions that later enable religious populism. Precisely because no actor can monopolize "the voice of Islam" in a post-Islamist civil state, political entrepreneurs can mobilize Islamic symbols in new, emotional, and polarizing ways. The next section builds on this insight

by showing how post-Islamist gains in democracy and rights can, under certain conditions, be re-channeled into populist projects that re-inscribe a moralized divide between "the ummah" and "the elite."

Religious Populism in Contemporary Politics

Religious populism constitutes the third key configuration in this article's conceptual-transformation framework. It emerges when religious idioms and symbols are fused with the populist logic of constructing a moral antagonism between a "pure people" and a "corrupt elite" (Hadiz, 2016). In this configuration, religion no longer functions primarily as a comprehensive legal–ideological blueprint (as in classical Islamism), but as an emotionally charged repertoire for defining who truly belongs to "the people." Populist leaders or movements claim exclusive representation of this morally homogeneous people, while depicting the elite as a small, self-serving, and oppressive minority (Beuter et al., 2023; Kaltwasser et al., 2017). When religion is added to this equation, "the people" are typically narrowed to a specific religious community (e.g. Muslims in Islamic populism), whereas "the elite" and various "external enemies" are portrayed not only as corrupt or unjust, but also as impious, anti-religious, or agents of foreign conspiracies (Garadian, 2017).

From this perspective, Islamic populism reframes many Muslims as both virtuous and victimized, while opponents may include secular or "insincere" Muslim rulers, liberal intellectuals, or religious minorities who are cast as scapegoats (Purnama, 2021). Religious slogans and symbols are deployed to arouse collective anger and moral indignation, generating a sense of besieged solidarity among "ordinary believers." The promise is less a concrete program of Islamic governance than a moral reassurance that, once "true believers" are in power, the people's dignity and interests will be restored (Lay et al., 2022). Theoretically, this marks a shift from the programmatic, ideology-heavy grammar of Islamism to a thinner, more flexible repertoire in which Islam functions as a

symbolic boundary marker and mobilizing affect rather than a detailed project of sharia implementation.

Religious populism gains traction in the same democratic arenas that post-Islamist actors helped open. As grand ideological conflicts recede, identity and religion becomes a powerful resource for mobilization (Beuter et al., 2023; Gayte, 2021). In this sense, religious populism can be read as one of the unintended by-products of post-Islamism; once political Islam accepts electoral competition and plural public debate, religious reference becomes available for strategic repackaging in populist form. Actors who were once ideological Islamists may recalibrate their strategies, discovering that it is electorally more effective to mobilize simple identity-based slogans than to argue for complex ideological visions. Unlike classical Islamism, religious populism does not necessarily prioritize formalizing sharia or establishing an Islamic state. Its primary goal is to win the support of religious majorities by dramatizing a moral divide between virtuous people and corrupt elites, usually framed in explicitly religious terms.

Conceptually, this generates a profound dilemma for democracy and pluralism. In principle, populism can channel grievances and increase participation by giving voice to marginalized groups. Yet, as Jan-Werner Müller emphasizes, the core of populism is anti-pluralism (Nawaz, 2019). Populist actors claim to be the only legitimate representatives of the people and delegitimize alternative voices. When this anti-pluralism is wrapped in religious idioms, the boundaries of the political community harden. "The people" are defined in narrow confessional terms, while minorities and dissenting groups are easily portrayed as "not truly of the people" or even "enemies of the faith." In the Middle East, this dynamic has surfaced in rhetoric that casts secular elites as Western puppets, thereby implicating Christian, Jewish, or heterodox Muslim minorities as part of an imagined anti-Islamic bloc. Examples include sectarian narratives used by some allies of President Mursi against Coptic Christians in Egypt, or the Islamo-nationalist populism of Erdoğan's AKP in Türkiye, where opposition groups, Kurds, and Alevis are periodically labeled as traitors to "Islam and the nation."

These discourses are not merely symbolic. Religious populism often mobilizes mass anger rather than deliberation, contributing to episodes of horizontal conflict. Demonstrations framed as "defending religion" can slide into intimidation or violence against religious minorities, as seen in attacks following blasphemy accusations or in campaigns to close churches or Ahmadiyah mosques. Such patterns illustrate how religious populism can erode the fragile compromises on which plural democratic orders rest. Theologically, the figure of "the enemy" is sacralized; politically, opponents are excluded not only from power, but from the moral community itself.

Importantly, religious populism is not confined to parties explicitly labeled "Islamist." Nationalist and secular politicians can also "play the religion card" when it serves electoral interests. This confirms that religious populism is more opportunistic than doctrinal; it can ride on Islamist sentiments without deep loyalty to an Islamist ideological platform (Hadiz, 2018). Thus, religious populism may overlay or cut across both Islamist and post-Islamist currents. The same Islamic symbols invoked in calls for ethical governance or civil state can be rearticulated as rallying cries against "enemies of Islam" or "anti-people elites."

For post-Islamist movements that have accepted pluralism and rights, this creates a strategic and normative challenge. Post-Islamist actors tend to argue at the level of ideas, policies, and institutional design, which are less likely to ignite mass emotions than the simple dichotomies deployed by populists. When economic conditions deteriorate, some segments of the public may find the populist call to "restore sharia" more emotionally compelling than nuanced arguments about civil state and pluralism. This underlines a central tension in the post-Islamist moment: the very democratic opening that allows Islamic ethics to be articulated in universal terms also enables religious populism to outflank post-Islamist actors from the right.

At the same time, religious populism can be interpreted as a symptom of deeper socio-economic grievances. Hadiz shows that Islamic populism is rooted in the frustrations of middle and lower-class Muslims who feel excluded by secular or oligarchic

elites. Religious idioms then become readily available languages for expressing demands for justice and dignity (Hadiz, 2018). This suggests that religious populism is not simply a "misuse" of religion, but a mode of articulating class, regional, and status anxieties through the most resonant moral vocabulary at hand. The challenge for plural democracy is therefore not only to curb incendiary identity politics, but also to address the structural injustices that make populist religious narratives persuasive.

Viewed in the broader arc of this study, religious populism represents a paradoxical continuation of the transformation from Islamism to post-Islamism. On one hand, it depends on post-Islamist gains of electoral competition, civil public spheres, and the normalization of Islamic reference in democratic discourse. On the other hand, it threatens to hollow out these gains by re-inscribing sharp moral boundaries between "ummah" and "elite," often at the expense of pluralism, minority rights, and substantive democratic norms. The evolution of political Islam thus appears not as a linear progression from ideology to moderation, but as a contested field in which the same religious symbols can underpin both inclusive, rights-oriented projects and exclusionary, populist mobilizations. The future of democracy in many Muslim-majority societies will, in significant part, be decided by how this tension is navigated: whether Islamic discourses are anchored more firmly in post-Islamist visions of inclusive citizenship, or drawn into narrower, anger-driven populist narratives that sacrifice pluralism for short-term political gain.

Conclusion

This article has proposed a conceptual-transformation framework that locates Islamism, post-Islamism, and religious populism within a single evolving ideological field rather than as neatly separated stages. The analysis identifies three intertwined trajectories: (1) a strategic shift from revolutionary, state-centric Islamism toward electoral participation; (2) a normative move from legal-formalist sharia to more ethical–substantive, rights-oriented post-Islamist discourses; and (3) the re-articulation of

Islamic symbols within religious populism, where the language of faith is thinned into a moralized divide between "the ummah" and "the elite." In this perspective, religious populism appears as a paradoxical continuation of the post-Islamist moment. It relies on the democratic opening, civil-state imaginaries, and rights-talk enabled by post-Islamism, while hollowing out their pluralist potential through emotional identity politics. This framework refines debates on post-Islamism by presenting it as a vulnerable reconfiguration exposed to conservative and populist appropriations, and it contributes to populism studies by showing how religious populism in Muslim contexts is anchored in prior Islamist and post-Islamist imaginaries, allowing the same Islamic lexicon to sustain both inclusive "Muslim democracy" and exclusionary, anti-pluralist mobilizations.

This study is limited by its conceptual and macro-comparative focus, relying mainly on secondary literature and selected primary texts, and thus cannot capture the full micro-level variation in how actors and constituencies negotiate the tension between post-Islamist ideals and populist temptations. Future research should therefore pursue empirical studies of post-Islamist actors under populist pressure through party-level analyses of discourse, coalition-building, and strategic adaptation vis-à-vis religious-populist challengers. Normatively, the findings highlight the urgency of developing Islamic ethical articulations of pluralism, citizenship, and justice that can address real grievances of inequality and corruption without collapsing them into sacralized identity divides, so that the democratic gains associated with post-Islamism are not ultimately captured and reversed by narrower, anger-driven forms of religious populism.

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