



Investigating the intricacies of populist leadership in the digital era while unraveling the paradox of tolerance in Indonesia

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the paradox of tolerance in Indonesia during the second term of the populist leadership of Joko Widodo. In addition, both physical and virtual interactions have become breeding grounds for intolerance during this period. Despite high expectations for increased tolerance, the freedom of speech facilitated by social media has aggravated and reinforced anti-pluralistic sentiments. Acts of intolerance, in contradiction to the constitutional guarantee of freedom of religion and belief, are perpetrated by entities both within and outside the state apparatus. The primary focus of this study is to address how the state should effectively respond to these intolerant actions in the domain of social media. The research method uses a netnography approach. Sampling was done by purposive sampling consisting of 12 YouTube channel accounts. Data collection was carried out by capturing 32,048 virtual community conversations and comment screens on 12 YouTube channels from August 24 to December 21, 2021. Thematic data analysis was conducted using the NVIVO 14 application or DAPA (Data Analysis Procedure by Application). The results showed that the state overlooked intolerant practices by Islamic apologists while directly persecuting Christian apologists exercising the fundamental right to free speech. Based on these results, the study recommends three key actions, including implementing inclusive broadcasting regulations for fair representation, establishing the digital democratic space to encourage open dialogue, and ensuring anti-discriminatory laws suited for the digital era to effectively combat intolerance.

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Introduction

Populist leadership of President Joko Widodo is capturing the global stage, eliciting positive resonance from a substantial portion of the Indonesian population (Spruyt et al., 2016). Globally recognized, the president leads the G20, representing over 60 percent of the population of the Earth, 75 percent of global trade, and an 80 percent share of the world's GDP as of 2022. However, during the two consecutive terms (2014–2024) of President Joko Widodo's tenure, Indonesia grappled with two critical challenges to religious freedom. The first challenge includes the growing strength of radical anti-pluralism groups. In contrast, the second problem is the reinforcement of accommodative politics and the weak structure of the state in protecting its citizens (Hasan, 2020, p. 1). This assessment correlates with an indicator showing a decline in the quality of tolerance (Sigit & Ismail, 2020).

Contrary to public expectation, the election of Joko Widodo did not bring the anticipated support to minorities. Disturbingly, the closure of 200 churches serves as a poignant example of this disappointment (Banu & Ridwan, 2021). The closures extended beyond Aceh, with Christians rendered powerless when *Satpol PP* (municipal police) executed the shutdown of ten churches and *undung-undung* (small houses of worship) on October 19, 2015. This left only the GKPPD church in Dongguan Village, Kuta Kerangan Simpang Kanan District (Wahab et al., 2020, p. 47). Even in areas close to Jakarta, where churches such as GKI Yasmin and HKBP Filadelfia met the necessary license and administrative requirements, the place of worship continues to face difficulties (Ariefana & Nirmalasari, 2020).

The challenge extends to the virtual domain, where freedom of apologetics faces restrictions in the rule-laden arena of social media. Disputes about data validity succumb to malicious means, including cybercrime methods or violations of the Electronic Information and Transactions Act (Bustomi, 2021). The government promptly takes action against broadcasts considered offensive to Islam by Christian YouTube channels, showing a more lenient approach in the opposite scenario (Coe, 2015, p. 16). This shows the favoritism of populist leadership towards the majority and discrimination against minorities.

The empirical reality reinforces the unfairness of the state, legitimizing intolerance in both the virtual and physical worlds. Existing study on religious freedom tends to be conventional (Albayrak, 2019), formalistic

and legal (Petty, 2016), focused on the digital era (Duc, 2009), (Patrick, 2017), and centered on social media (Zaenal & Eko, 2021).

Examining these occurrences and building on prior research, there exists a significant deficiency in investigating populist leadership concerning pluralism using a nethnography-based approach. Consequently, this study explores the determinants influencing incidents of intolerance on social media and scrutinizes the state's response to such occurrences under populist leadership.

Literature Review

Pluralism and Tolerance

In a diverse world, religious pluralism encountered substantial challenges, especially in the internet era where emotionless algorithms and logic governed various aspects through artificial intelligence (AI) control (Ammerman, 2010). Therefore, fostering empirical tolerance was crucial through virtual dialogues on the internet. Failure to address this would result in repeated misunderstandings, given the growing limitation on interaction and contributing to the expansion of prejudice (Gnana & Patrick, 2018).

Entering the digital civilization, religion's role failed to diminish and was strengthened. Religious institutions accustomed to monopoly status now faced competition, creating a religious market where individuals had to make choices. This conscious decision-making transformed religion from a taken-for-granted aspect to an object of reflection and individual decision (Berger et al., 2008).

Understanding religion as an individual decision suggests that pluralistic religious beliefs need not trigger a crisis of faith (Ammerman, 2010, p. 155). This correlated with the perspective of Sikka that pluralism should fortify belief and tolerance in religious practices (Sikka, 2021). However, the opposite seemed true as the encounter of religions appeared to strengthen differences, leading to prejudice and conflict (Leesmid & Jarunratanakul, 2022; Priyowidodo, 2010; Susanto, 2017).

In essence, pluralism could be constructed through mutual respect and an acknowledgment of other religious beliefs. Therefore, there should be a mechanism for understanding pluralism based on social and cultural contexts. Ammerman stated that five aspects needed attention (Ammerman, 2010, p. 159), comprising spirituality as a mysterious force causing inexplicable results, spirituality as extraordinary experiences pointing

to a greater reality, spirituality intertwined with meaning, spirituality as morality (compassion), and spirituality as a connection to something beyond oneself, identified as gods or transcendent reality.

Failure to fulfill these characteristics led to intolerant religious interactions, with all parties prioritizing individual interests. UNESCO characterized intolerant behavior through fifteen forms of action, including language, stereotyping, teasing, prejudice, scapegoating (blaming traumatic events or social problems on a particular group), discrimination, ostracism, harassment, desecration and effacement, bullying, expulsion, exclusion, segregation, repression, and destruction (Unesco, 1994). In essence, when religion was oriented extrinsically or instrumentally, it manifested in characters that were passionate, prejudiced, aggressive, and insecure. On the contrary, intrinsic religion was a spirit built through developing internal and non-antisocial awareness (Powell & Clarke, 2013).

Leadership Populism and Social Media Power

There was a lack of consensus regarding populist or populist leadership (Tapsell, 2021) (Gagnon et al., 2018). However, populism was binary, dividing between the elite (established group) and the pauper (unestablished group). Muller argued that the term was often used as a synonym for “anti-establishment”. By its nature, populism remained consistently anti-pluralist and anti-elitist, with populists asserting exclusive rights to represent the citizens (Müller, 2016), creating a condescending attitude towards other parties. The essence of populism showed a phenomenon of manipulation and a reluctance to engage with political elites and intellectuals. Therefore, it remained a subject of political discourse and scientific debate (Fuentes, 2020; Piriyaikul et al., 2022; Seijts & Clercy, 2020)

Populism was defined as the pure expression of the will of diverse citizens, with leadership found in left or right-orientated political parties, a combination of both, and anti-corruption fighters (Oliver & Rahn, 2016, p. 191). Four main characteristics of populism leadership evolved, namely: (1) the Existence of two homogeneous groups, ‘citizens’ and ‘established elites’; (2) the Antagonistic relationship between the groups; (3) Portraying the ‘citizens’ as virtuous and humbling the elite, and (4) Considering the will of the citizens as the highest source of legitimacy (popular sovereignty) (Spruyt et al., 2016). In line with these characteristics, Roodoijn argued that populist leadership had four main features, namely, (1) Affirming the central position of

the citizens, (2) Criticizing the elite, (3) Viewing the citizens as homogeneous entities, and (4) Declaring a serious crisis (Roodoijn, 2013, p. 572). Selecting the right method was crucial for understanding populism, including affirming homogeneous aspirations, ideationally asserting a division between citizens and the corrupt elite, and adopting an organizational or multi-class approach based on the social-political economy in a historical context (Margiansyah, 2019, p. 50).

The prestige of populist leaders largely depended on how the media constructed the image. The press played a crucial role in shaping the self-image of populist leaders through its power over the broadcasting oligarchy (Tapsell, 2015, p. 35) and social media power (Buwana & Kurnia, 2021). Conversely, social media could deconstruct the image of a populist leader (Rusmulyadi & Hafiar, 2018, p. 120). Therefore, a collaboration between the entities was crucial. In the event of harm to a populist leader’s image by a social media platform, prompt measures were used, leveraging existing legal frameworks such as Law No. 11 of 2008 on Information and Electronic Transactions (ITE) and the Criminal Code.

Based on the four main theories, namely, pluralism, tolerance, populism leadership, and social media power, the research flow of *the Intricacies of Populist Leadership in the Digital Era* can be mapped clearly. A summary of the flow of the theoretical framework in this study can be seen in the spider diagram visualization as seen in Figure 1 below.

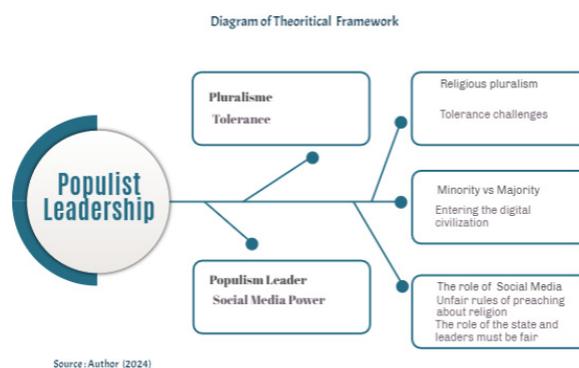


Figure 1 The spider diagram visualization of populist leadership

Note: Populist leadership is shaped by the level of societal tolerance toward populism and the influence of social media in constructing the image of populist leaders. Moreover, effective populist leadership must engage with the complexities of religious pluralism, challenges to tolerance, dynamics between majority and minority groups, as well as the role of both the state and its leaders.

Methodology

This study adopted the ethnography method within the constructive/interpretive paradigms. Netnography was subsequently conducted through five sequential steps, including the definition of study questions, the selection and identification of communities, data collection, analysis, and the preparation of the report (Priyowidodo, 2020). According to Kozinets (1998), netnography included creating written records by studying cultures and communities arising from internet-based communication. Figure 2 focuses on the seven steps or stages of implementing the netnography method. Steps of netnography:

Data collection included capturing virtual community conversations and comment screens on ten YouTube channels from August 24 to December 21, 2021. Experts engaged as online observers in discussions regarding the religious controversy in the digital space, specifically focusing on the

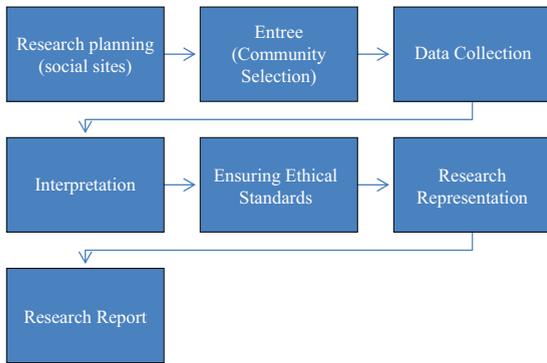


Figure 2 Flowchart of netnography steps

legal case of Muhammad Kace, a Christian apologist and YouTuber with a channel named MuhammadKace featuring 450 videos. The contentious statement that led to the arrest by the Indonesian police was, “Muhammad is close with evil spirits” (Surah 72 verse 19). The arrest, conducted by the Directorate of Cyber Crimes and Bali Police in North Kuta, Badung, occurred on August 24, 2021. During the detention period, Inspector General of Police Napoleon Bonaparte subjected the offender to persecution, compelling consumption of feces. Following the detention period, the offender experienced a trial in the State Court of Ciamis, West Java, and received a 10-year prison sentence as charged by the prosecutor. This topic became the central theme of online discussion across twelve religious spreading channels (six Christian and six Muslim channels).

The data consisted of 32,048 annotations from conversational texts or comments related to the main theme. Selecting data included two steps, the direct observation of the channel community, interaction, and discussion among participants, followed by elaborating meanings. Second, experts directly copied data from computer-mediated communications within the online community.

Thematic data analysis was conducted using the NVIVO 14 application or DAPA (Data Analysis Procedure by Application). The results were visually shown based on conversational themes among group members. To ensure data validity, a triangulation test was performed in two stages (Bungin, 2021). Firstly, confirming the date of the analysis process, and secondly, crosschecking the data upon completing the study report. This crosschecking comprised verification with resource individuals and correlation with existing theories.

Table 1 Sample of YouTube channel accounts

No	Account YouTube Channel	References/ text annotation	Ratio of References/ Text Annotation per Account	Total Number of Followers	Link of Channel	Affiliation of Religious
1	Al-Hayat Indonesia	2405	7.6%	74.1K	https://www.youtube.com/@alhayatindonesia2022	Christian
2	Masjid Youtube	3379	10.5%	178K	https://www.youtube.com/@masjidyoutube6845	Moslem
3	Penegak Islam	2644	8.2%	3.08K	https://www.youtube.com/@penegakislam538/	Moslem
4	Sang Debaters	3263	10.1%	128K	https://www.youtube.com/@sangdebaters	Christian
5	Terang Dunia	3056	9.7%	107K	https://www.youtube.com/@TerangDunia	Christian
6	Uni Riva/ RivaMOWTV	2405	7.6%	100K	https://www.youtube.com/@rivamowtv1257	Moslem
7	Fatimah Sakdiyah	2379	7.4%	87.8K	https://www.youtube.com/@fatimahsakdiyah4290	Christian
8	Metanoia-Matanoia	2644	8.2 %	394K	https://www.youtube.com/@metanoiametanoia	Christian

Table 1 Continued

No	Account YouTube Channel	References/ text annotation	Ratio of References/ Text Annotation per Account	Total Number of Followers	Link of Channel	Affiliation of Religious
9	Saifuddin Ibrahim	2413	7.5%	284K	https://www.youtube.com/@SaifuddinIbrahimTV	Christian
10	Mualaf Centre Aya	2856	8.9%	557K	https://www.youtube.com/@MUALAFCENTERAYASOFYA	Moslem
11	Perianto Zamazi	2254	7.0%	257K	https://www.youtube.com/@PeriantoZamasi90	Moslem
12	Islam. ID	2350	7.3%	772K	https://www.youtube.com/@ISLAMIDOFFICIAL	Moslem

Source: Author (2022)

Results and Discussion

The paradox of tolerance in Indonesia was triggered by two main determinants, namely, the abuse of populist leadership authority and actions of intolerance. These factors significantly diminished religious tolerance in the country, with a growing number of individuals and groups advocating for a shift towards the *Caliphate* system. Within the system, tolerance was no longer grounded in heterogeneity but became a social construction based on homogeneity.

Various virtual communities openly campaigned for the implementation of the Caliphate system through

YouTube. The expectations of the community centered around, at the very least, the implementation of the Jakarta Charter, originally stating “*Ketuhanan dengan kewajiban menjalankan syariat Islam bagi pemeluknya*” (“the belief in God, where Islamic law should be obliged by Muslims”). The uncertainty surrounding the validity of this new narrative contributed to the visualization of the paradox of intolerance, as shown in Figure 3 below.

Both endogenous and exogenous factors played a role in influencing tolerance. However, populist leadership hinged on three crucial elements, namely, the leader’s orientation, characteristics, and affiliation with a particular political party. These dynamics shaped the landscape of religious tolerance in Indonesia during the specified period.

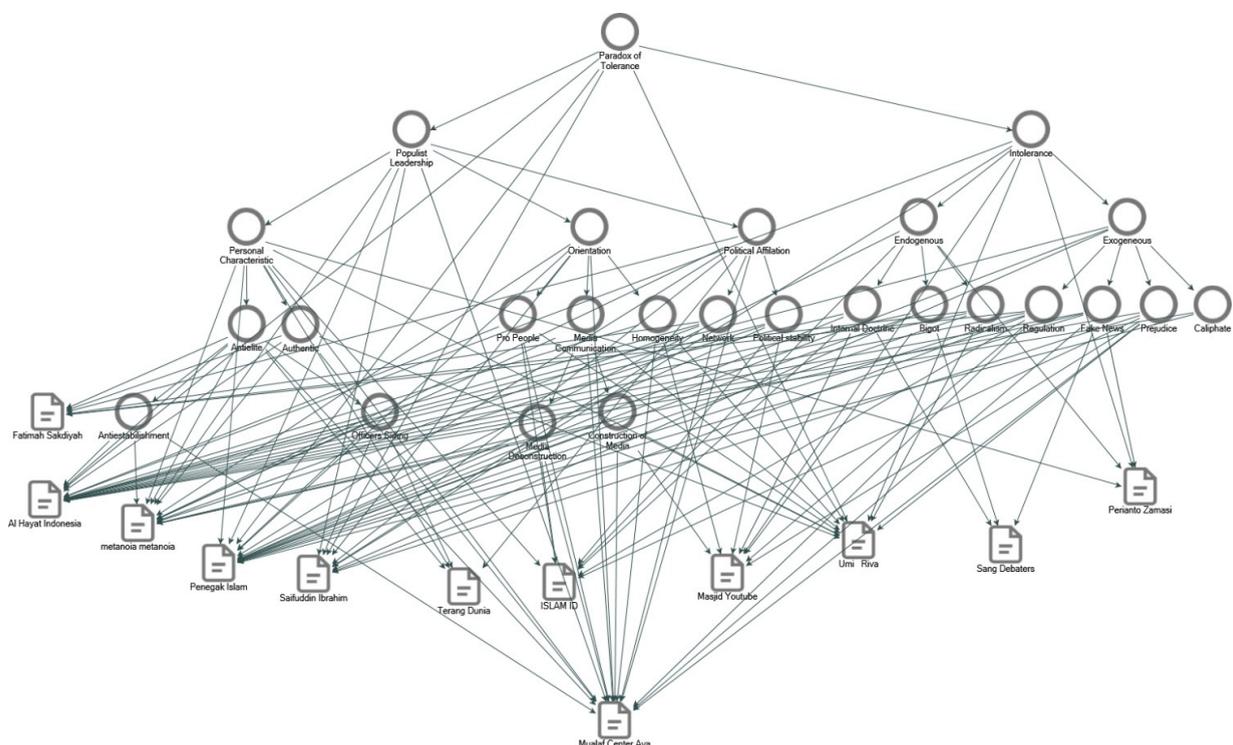


Figure 3 Paradox of tolerance

Factors Influencing the Acts of Intolerance on Social Media

Digital civilization had a profound impact on social cohesiveness, leading to increased conflicts arising from differences of opinion, ethnicity, political views, social structures, and personal beliefs. YouTube channels became a prominent arena where these conditions manifested. Actions of intolerance, from two main causes with seven derivative elements, easily occurred in the virtual world. Endogenous factors comprised bigot, internal doctrine, and radicalism, while exogenous elements included Caliphate, fake news, prejudice, and regulation. The correlation among these elements showed how intolerance thrived in the digital era, as detailed in the mapping flow. Figure 4 clearly illustrates the key elements that contribute to intolerant practices.

Intolerance is caused by two factors, namely, endogenous factors and exogenous factors. A detailed explanation is as follows. Endogenous factors are divided into sub-factors (bigot, internal doctrine, and radicalism) and exogenous factors (caliphate, fake news, prejudice, and regulation). A bigot is someone who hates or refuses to accept members of a particular religious group, such as racial groups or other religions. The terminology of internal doctrine in religion is the foundation for the religious practices, rituals, and moral codes that guide the behavior and beliefs of adherents. In Islam, for instance, the internal doctrine is primarily based on the Quran and the Sunnah (the traditions and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad). Radicalism in a religious context is defined as a religious understanding that refers to a very basic religious foundation with very high religious fanaticism. The adherents of this ideology often use physical violence.

Exogenous factors consist of caliphate, fake news, prejudice, and regulation. Caliphate in Islam means a government based on Islamic law, led by a caliph appointed by the people and functions to uphold religion and manage world affairs with the principles of justice and equality. Fake news is untrue, false, or inaccurate information that is disseminated to deceive or incite others, and has a significant negative impact on society. Social prejudice is a process in which individuals perceive or understand others based on inaccurate attributions, which can affect one's behavior in interacting with others and can hinder the process of education and harmonious social transformation. Government regulation is essential in understanding how the government plays a role in regulating and supervising various aspects of people's lives. These regulations can affect people's behavior, economic development, and political stability in a society.

The divergent directions of interest between endogenous and exogenous factors played a crucial role. Endogenous factors bolstered the militancy spirit through direct information dissemination. Members of the Islamic YouTube channel community responded to the case of insults committed by Muhammad Kace (KC), also known as Muhammad Kosman, viewing it as unusual. Jay Adih expressed the view that insults should be countered with more substantial insults to maintain the safety and unity of the nation. Nur Hasanah and Ismail Marzuki echoed similar sentiments, expressing discontent with KC's actions without considering the feelings of the Islamic community. Nur and Ismail both advocated for legal actions against KC, considering the offender a poison to the world, specifically to the Islamic community.

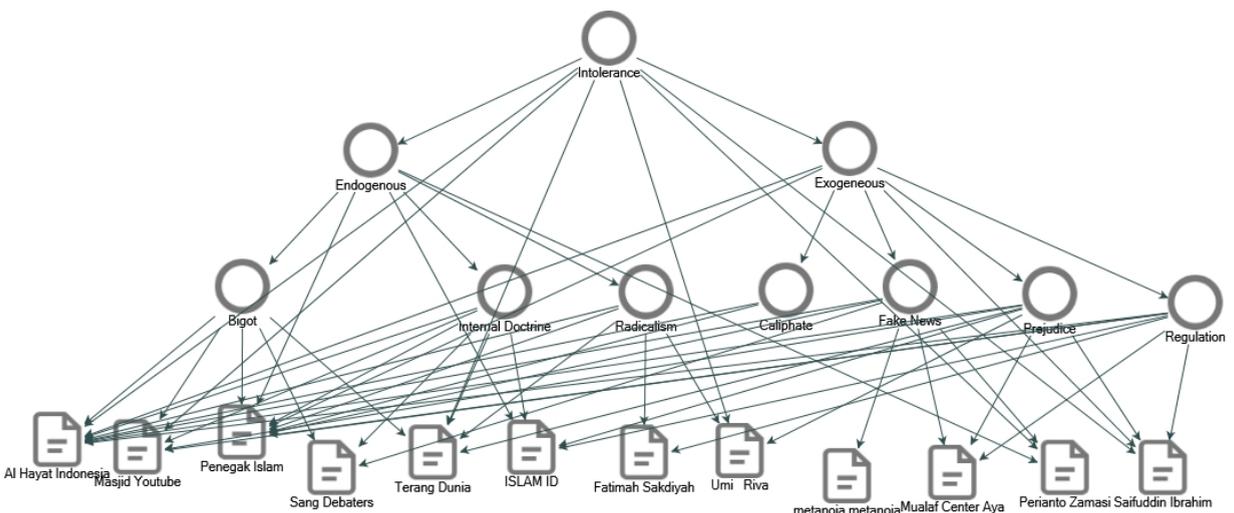


Figure 4 Intolerance factors

These responses were shaped by incomplete information from a few seconds of a Mesjid YouTube video. Mesjid YouTube, as an “Islamic” channel, successfully constructed an anti-tolerance narrative by selectively presenting cuts of the video. The video did not entirely show the context behind the statement of MKC that Prophet Muhammad was surrounded by Genies.

Not only did some fanatic groups agree to imprison MKC, but went as far as stating that his blood was halal. Susila Sudarti, in the Penegak Islam channel, expressed the sentiment below.

“Kace will suffer in this world and the hereafter. In this world, KC will be behind bars, and in the hereafter, and will be burned in hellfire. Insults to Prophet Muhammad and the Koran render the blood lawful to be shed; the mouth becomes dirty for insulting Islam. Consequently, insults are received due to the rotten mouth.”

This quote vividly shows the intensity of the situation. Interviewees seemed oblivious to the fact that what Muhammad Kace was broadcasting was a response to the lecture delivered by a Muslim cleric, Abdul Somad, who stated there was an infidel jinni on the cross of Jesus Christ. The full text reads, *“Because on the cross there is an infidel jinni that comes out of a statue. That’s why statues are not kept.... called Hallelujah”*.

For Christians, the lecture was humiliating, as it was delivered in public on social media, and the referenced Bible verse was not available, rendering the lecture containing fake news. Despite a filed report, no subsequent action occurred, while the MKC case was promptly processed, resulting in an arrest.

Regulations prohibited statements without valid references under Article 28 of Law No. 11 of 2008 concerning Information and Electronic Transactions. Social media, categorized as press media, was granted the right of reply under Article 5 of Law Number 40 of 1999 concerning the Press. Internal factors aside, acts of intolerance were also caused by the weak implementation of various regulations in multi-religious Indonesia.

Indonesia, recognizing six official religions, namely, Islam, Protestant Christianity, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, faced challenges in building mutual trust between various beliefs. In the digital era, everyone expressed thoughts, including ideas to implement the Caliphate system. Despite being a new idea, Hizbuth Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) used to promote the perspective before it was dissolved by the Indonesian

government on July 19, 2017. Marthin Dixon, Sintu Only, and Bturnip Saragih from Al Hayat Indonesia expressed opinions with the following statements.

“Radical groups and figures are behind the promotion of the Caliphate system, having started advertising the Caliphate state. Be careful my friends, keep holding on to Pancasila and the 1945 Constitution, resembling regulated robots. Sad!”

Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, the Governor of DKI Jakarta (2014–2017), faced opposition from several intolerant groups, including *Front* and *Laskar Pembela* Islams. The audacity of radical Islamic groups campaigning for the Caliphate system became evident through destructive acts targeting churches as symbols of Christianity. Examples include the bomb explosion at the Oikumene Church in Sengkotek, Samarinda, East Kalimantan (2016), the explosion at three places of worship in Surabaya, namely, the Santa Maria Catholic Church, the Surabaya Central Pentecostal Church and GKI Diponegoro (2018). Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, the terrorist group *Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD)* detonated a bomb at the Makassar Cathedral Catholic Church (2021).

The evidence showed that social media, specifically YouTube, acted as a double-edged sword. It fostered social cohesiveness based on religious plurality, serving as an instrument for inter-religious dialogue in the digital era. However, YouTube also became a tool to disrupt the social relationship between communities of different religions. Relationships between individuals of different religions were often characterized by mutual prejudice and hostility, with virtual content escalating into physical clashes. This empirical fact confirmed that the dominant factor triggering intolerance was the lack of inter-religious communication. These conditions triggered prejudice against other groups, with potential economic repercussions (Goel & Misra, 2020). To regulate da’wah through social media, the Jokowi administration must optimize the implementation of Law Number 11/2008 on Electronic Information and Transactions (UU ITE) in a fair manner for both the minority and the majority, without discrimination.

However, if the Law on Electronic Information and Transactions is still not enough, the Government together with the House of Representatives must immediately issue special regulations related to the complete regulation of social media. This is in line with the opinion that law is a rule made for the protection of society and is coercive (Davenport, 2007; Priyowidodo et al., 2024).

Therefore, virtual dialogue through social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, websites, Twitter, or WhatsApp could facilitate mutual understanding in a heterogeneous society (Bastian, 2015). If not, the practice of living a life full of intolerance will be even more vibrant, because every individual and community group is only concerned with themselves. Even in the era of President Jokowi, there is a tendency to allow social media channels to be used for the promotion of intolerant practices. This finding is in line with the fact that the media is very instrumental in promoting narratives that trigger disharmony, sharpening society to live in a spirit of intolerance, and alternative voices are often suppressed (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014).

Populist Leadership and Actions of Intolerance on Social Media

Although the characteristics of populist leadership were not conclusively determined, every study on this topic consistently yielded similar outcomes. The variation arose from the emphasis placed on context-specific factors in each study location. Data analysis showed that populist leadership was defined by three dimensions, including personal character, orientation, and political affiliation. These characteristics significantly influence how leaders dealt with acts of intolerance in the digital era.

The personal character dimension comprised four sub-dimensions, namely, anti-elite, authentic, anti-establishment, and officers siding. The orientation dimension included five sub-categories, namely, homogeneity, media communication, construction and deconstruction of media, and pro-individual. Additionally, political affiliation consisted of network and political stability. The detailed concepts are shown in the following Figure 5 which clearly illustrates that populist leadership is largely determined by three aspects, namely orientation, personal character and political affiliation.

Populist leadership determinants consist of sub-factors of orientation, personal character, and political affiliation. Political interest orientation is an important aspect of understanding political behavior and decisions, as well as how individuals and groups prioritize their interests in the political decision process.

Personal character orientation is an approach that focuses on developing individual personal traits. This orientation aims to improve the quality of individuals personally so that they can become reliable and professional human resources. Political affiliation Individuals are those who adhere to a political ideology, such as liberalism, conservatism, or socialism, and strive to realize ideological values and goals in their daily lives.

Populist leadership projected a strong character in advocating for equal rights under the law and regulations. However, this mission was not optimally executed in Indonesia, as Salmon Pakeda explained.

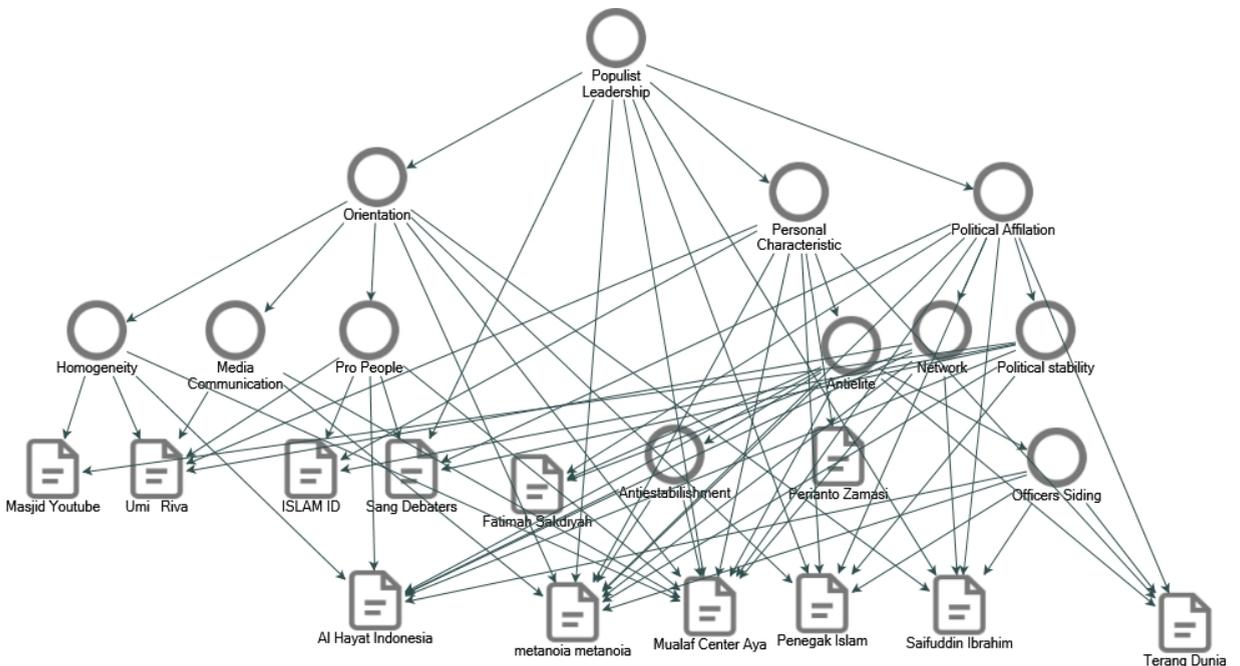


Figure 5 Populist leadership

“In Indonesia, numerous officials in the executive, judicial, and legislative institutions abuse public trust and the state system, justifying wrongdoings and distorting what is right. This misuse of the state system by dishonest officials has been observed and noted.”

Salmon Pakeda’s assessment was substantiated as a factual truth. The police, as a state institution under the President, took actions inconsistent with the protection of citizens accused of law violations. After the arrest on August 25, 2021, Mohammad Kosman or Muhammad Kace was transported from Badung, Bali Province to Jakarta and detained at the Indonesian Police Criminal Investigation Department (Bareskrim Detention). On August 26, 2021, MKC endured three instances of torture at 1 pm, 2 pm, and 3 pm.

Inspector General of Police Napoleon Bonaparte subjected MKC to the most severe form of torture, compelling the offender to consume human feces that had been prepared in advance. These inhumane acts not only violated the Criminal Code (KUHP) but also contravened several international rules ratified by Indonesia. For instance, the country had ratified the United Nations Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (UNCAT) through Law No. 5 of 1998, as well as the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, 1965 (Law No. 29/1999).

Indonesia faced a dilemma in addressing religious heterogeneity, a departure from the era under President Soeharto (1966–1998) when all actions were controlled by the state (Bräuchler, 2010, p. 6). Four sensitive issues, namely, SARA (Ethnicity, Religion, Race, and Inter-group), were not openly discussed, considering the multi-cultural character of Indonesia. Since the reform era in 1998, open discussions on freedom of expression, including both face-to-face and virtual communication, have been permitted. However, the disclosure of information without the ability to respect different perspectives could potentially lead to political instability, as pointed out by Abdul Majid from the Muallaf Centre as follows.

“Religion is a sensitive issue that should be respected. In Singapore & Malaysia, this issue should not be intervened and criticized openly as it can bring chaos”

The populist leadership of Joko Widodo was significantly influenced by mass media. Although freedom

of speech allowed individuals to express opinions, it also posed challenges in controlling the narrative. Consequently, Joko Widodo often faced perceptions of being a weak leader due to media deconstruction, marked by omission and partiality. The police and prosecutors, as representatives of executive institutions under the control of the President, ended up taking sides in handling the legal case of YouTuber Muhammad Kace (MKC). This showed a practice of discriminating justice, contradicting Article 28 E of the 1945 Constitution, which explicitly grants everyone the right to freedom of beliefs, expression of thoughts, and attitudes according to the conscience of the individual.

Contrary to expectations, the re-election of President Joko Widodo for the second term (2019–2024) did not result in significant advancements for minority rights in religious freedom. Acts of violence in the name of religion increased, both in sociologically factual and virtual contexts. This paradox conflicted with the legal-constructive steps taken in international forums by Indonesia, having ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights reflected in Law no. 12/ 2005 and adhering to the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief. The situation raised concerns, even though the UN General Assembly initiated Resolution No. 36/55 on November 25, 1981, despite the thematic and annual reports submitted by the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief (Sigit & Ismail, 2020).

Although Indonesia possessed a comprehensive formal legal basis to prevent anti-tolerance and discrimination, the implementation fell short of expectations. During Joko Widodo leadership, acts of intolerance persisted, contravening Unesco’s provisions and including elements such as bullying, expulsion, and repression. The situation was seen in the case of Muhammad Kace (MKC), who was expelled from Ciamis, West Java, reflecting one of 180 violations of freedom of religion and belief recorded in 2020 across 424 forms of action in 29 provinces. The highest incidents occurred in 10 areas, namely, West Java (39), East Java (23), Aceh (18), DKI Jakarta (13), Central Java (12), North Sumatra (9), South Sulawesi (8), Special Region of Yogyakarta (7), Banten (6), and West Sumatra (5) (Sigit & Ismail, 2020).

The empirical reality above reinforces the research that populism is not only an anti-elitist ideology but also an anti-pluralist one (Müller, 2016). In intolerant societies, where tolerance for diversity is very low, populist leaders can easily gain traction by using sectarian identities such as ethnic, religious, or regional lines. Populism can even be a tool for the majority to assert dominance over the minority.

Populist leadership thrives in contexts where the legitimacy of democratic institutions is questioned. Populist leaders often adopt rhetoric that pits “the people” against “the elite”. This approach can result in the delegitimation of pluralistic values and reduced tolerance for dissent (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2018).

Conclusion and Recommendation

In conclusion, this study explored two determinants influencing anti-tolerance measures, namely, endogenous and exogenous factors. The endogenous factors were expressed through bigot, internal doctrine, and radicalism, while the exogenous elements were evident in the Caliphate system campaigns, fake news, prejudices, and regulations. These seven factors showed a strong correlation, providing insights into the ease with which intolerance, particularly in the digital era, could manifest. This fact is in line with the views of Powell and Clarke where digital space if not managed properly can become an instrument of violence and intolerance (Powell & Clarke, 2013).

The transition from virtual anti-tolerance to real-world implications was a significant trend. Indonesia, with its diversity in religions, ethnicities, races, and community groups, should ideally foster a spirit of coexistence and peaceful cohabitation on social media platforms. The nation should ensure equal protection for all, regardless of religious affiliations, to prevent discrimination leading to chaos reminiscent of the events during the 1998 reform era. Regarding regulations, the rules for preaching on social media are regulated in Law No. 19 on ITE in 2016 and Law 39 on Human Rights in 1999.

Populist leadership, characterized by personal character, orientation, and political affiliation, held significant relevance in addressing acts of intolerance. In the context of religious relations, President Joko Widodo’s populist leadership did not fully harness the potential of social media. Instances of unfair actions by state institutions in handling religious violations showed a departure from the principle of equal rights and obligations before the law. The digital era, particularly YouTube, was recommended to be devoid of content that supported intolerance. The significance of the results of this research is to fill the gap that the issue of virtual intolerance turns out to be very easily manifested in physical intolerance.

The recommendations of this research include two things. First, for further research, a phenomenography or ethnography approach can be used. Second, for policy recommendations, Jokowi's populist leadership should be encouraged to abolish Law Number 1/PNPS/1965 on the Prevention of Religious Abuse and/or Blasphemy. Amend the rubber articles of the Electronic Information and Transaction Law (ITE) and the Criminal Code (KUHP) that harm the existence of minorities in preaching in Indonesia.

Future study is encouraged to adopt a mixed-method method for analyzing empirical data with a focus on meaning elaboration. Additionally, supporting and urging Jokowi's populist leadership to revise discriminative ordinances, such as Law Number 1/PNPS/1965 on the Prevention and Insult against Religion, the Law on Electronic Information and Transaction, and the Criminal Code (KUHP), is considered crucial for the protection of minority groups.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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