

Populism and Islamic leaders

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Our firm has completed a database on populism using the definition discussed in my prior columns. In addition to summarizing key findings, this column explores populism in Muslim-majority countries.

Currently, seven of the countries, among the 49 countries defined as part of the emerging and developed markets, have populist leaders. Most, if not all, of those leaders will not be surprises:

- Scott Morrison of Australia
- Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil
- Viktor Orban of Hungary
- Andrés Manuel López Obrador of Mexico
- Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines, and
- Andrzej Duda of Poland.

These leaders are viewed as populists by their opposing parties, the media *and* often people within their own party. Over and above perceptions, the actions of these leaders are populist.

None of the populists are Muslim, and none of the countries have Muslim majorities. To a certain extent the opposite is true, with varying levels of Islamophobic comments attributable to the populists. To be clear, however, Islamophobia is not a factor in the model to assess populism.

The research split the leaders into three categories: populists, semi-populists and non-populists. More than two-

thirds of current leaders fall into the third category. Only five leaders were considered semi-populists; three are leaders in Muslim-majority countries:

- Joko Widodo of Indonesia
- Imran Khan of Pakistan, and
- Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey.

Five Muslim-majority countries have non-populist leaders. That said, three of these five are not democracies:

- Saudi Arabia
- Qatar, and
- the UAE.

Assessing whether royal leaders in kingdoms are populists is somewhat rhetorical. Almost by definition, it is hard for such a leader to be a populist. The other two Muslim-majority countries with non-populist leaders are Egypt and Malaysia.

Remember that this process only measures populism. Leaders who are not populists can still be autocratic. A separate analysis would be required to assess the impact of autocrats on governance.

The current research is testing the proposition that the version of populism we see *now* is harmful to governance. With the database complete, the efforts shift to comparing

governance under each leader and correlating the governance changes under that leadership with the populism assessment.

The lack of a full populist leader in any Muslim-majority country appears to be the only clear conclusion so far. More work will be required to determine if there is a causal relationship. Of the Muslim-majority countries with democracies, 60% have a leader espousing some form of populism, even if the leaders are less than complete populists, whereas less than a quarter of the countries that are not Muslim-majority have some form of populist leader. The limited number of

data points means that any comparison needs to be taken with a grain of salt.

As you know, Islamic guidance is inconsistent with populism. Muslims should take care of everyone, instead of being divisive. Muslims should be good stewards of everything in their direct or indirect possession, instead of serving a small portion of the citizens. Basically, the **current definition** of the term populism is inconsistent with the Maqasid Shariah. Additional research may provide insight into whether leaders who are Muslims demonstrate leadership consistent with their duty of care. ☺



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