Populism and Religious Nationalism in France and Indonesia

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In the first half of 2017 three significant elections took place in which issues of identity and religion were of paramount importance. In France, the Netherlands, and Indonesia we saw how a narrow nationalism based largely upon religious identity has become increasingly attractive to voters. What is most interesting is that this occurred in vastly different political and cultural contexts. What does this mean, and is there a connection between the results?

In France – where a two-stage election was held across April and May – identity and the place of Islam in society were at the forefront of the campaign. Front National leader Marine Le Pen ran on a nationalist platform, presenting herself the only candidate who could 'save' French culture from the twin evils of Muslim immigration and globalisation. Le Pen, who has called France "a country very anciently founded on Judeo-Christian values," argued that French culture was slowly being eroded by the forces of globalisation, and by Muslims immigrants who refused to assimilate. Muslim immigration, she insisted, must therefore be halted, and France's "strong Greco-Latin and Christian roots" be protected in the constitution.

Dividing between the globalists and Muslims on the one hand, and the patriotic 'true' French on the other, proved successful for Le Pen, who won a record high 35% of the vote in the second round of voting.

Even more obviously than in France, issues related to religious and national identity played perhaps the most crucial role in deciding who would become the next governor of Jakarta, Indonesia. The election pitted the incumbent governor, Chinese Christian Basuki Tjahaja Purnama – known as Ahok – against Anies Baswedan, a Sunni Muslim backed by religious conservatives and elements in the military.

Ahok had been in many respects a successful governor, and the author of popular reforms. Yet his status as a Chinese Christian left him open to attacks from the Islamic nationalists, especially the hardline Islamic Defenders Front, a conservative nationalist movement which rejects pluralism and claims Indonesian identity and culture must be based upon Sunni Islam.

According to the Islamic Defenders Front, the Indonesian people want to live under Islamic law. Secularists who have prevented its implementation they claim to be betraying the will of 'the people.' Soon after Ahok became governor the Islamic Defenders Front questioned his legitimacy, citing a Quranic verse (Surah Al-Maidah 5:51) which they claimed forbade non-Muslims from ruling over a Muslim polity. They and other like minded groups ran a grass roots populist-style campaign out of conservative mosques against Ahok, and later helped organise large-scale protests to protest against his rule. When Ahok claimed that his opponents had misrepresented the Qur'an, they pressured authorities into charging him under Indonesia's blasphemy law.

By the time the elections came around, many ordinary Jakartans were apparently convinced that Ahok had no right to rule over a majority Muslim population. Attracting just 42% of the vote, Ahok lost the election. Worse was to come. Found guilty by a court of blasphemy, he was sentenced to two years imprisonment.

At first glance, it may not be easy to link the Jakarta and French election results. Le Pen is not a religious leader calling for people to go to church, but a secularist drawing on religious language and heritage to define national culture. On the other hand, the Islamic Defenders Front wish to create a society based on strict Islamic law. Yet there are important similarities which may tell us how the return of religion to public life is changing domestic and international politics.

The Front National and the Islamic Defenders Front are very different organisations, but they share three things in common. They conceive of nationalism as being based primarily on religious identity. They make populist appeals to the will of the people, and often claim to be defending 'the people' against their enemies. They each object to the perceived negative changes brought to their societies by globalisation.

In both elections, then, we see the rising importance of religion in public life. What we are not seeing, however, is the emergence of pluralist post-secular societies. Rather, religion appears to be re-emerging in each of these cases as a source of national identity, and a tool used by nationalist-populist political movements to exclude those who do not share the heritage and identity of the majority, in whose name these movements claim to speak.

Scholars have theorised that religion's return to public life may signal a threat to the Westphalian system of state sovereignty. But in the cases I have discussed we are not seeing a straightforward strengthening of global religious identities. The Islamic Defenders Front and Front National emphasise religious identity to defend national culture against perceived international threats. Thus they are anti-cosmopolitan, anti-pluralist, and invoke religion primarily in order to sharply define who belongs to – and who must be excluded from – the nation.

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