

The Role of Islamic Political Thought in Responding to the Challenges of Global Populism

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Abstract: This research explores the contemporary relevance of Islamic political thought in addressing the moral and structural challenges posed by global populism, particularly its tendency to exploit religious sentiment for political gain. By examining the philosophical and ethical foundations articulated by classical and modern Islamic scholars such as Al-Mawardi, Al-Farabi, Ibn Khaldun, Muhammad Abduh, Rashid Rida, and Ali Shariati, this study highlights how Islamic governance emphasizes justice (adl), consultation (shura), and public welfare (maslahah) as central principles for legitimate authority. Using a qualitative and comparative approach, the research contrasts the inclusive moral vision of Islamic political ethics with the divisive logic of populist politics that often relies on polarization and emotional manipulation. The findings reveal that Islamic political thought provides a coherent ethical framework for reconciling faith-based values with democratic governance. It demonstrates that Islam envisions politics as a moral responsibility (amanah), grounded in accountability to God and service to the community, thereby rejecting populist tendencies toward exclusion, intolerance, and authoritarianism. Moreover, the study argues that Islamic ethics complements democratic principles by promoting participation, equality, and social justice within a spiritually guided political system. Ultimately, this research contributes to the global intercultural dialogue on harmonizing religion and democracy, offering Islam's moral-political philosophy as an alternative model for sustaining justice, inclusion, and ethical leadership in contemporary governance. The integration of spiritual ethics with democratic practice not only challenges the excesses of populism but also reaffirms the enduring relevance of faith-based political thought in the pursuit of a just and humane global order.

Research Highlights:

- Bridges classical and modern Islamic political thought to examine its role in addressing the rise of global populism.
- Reveals how Islamic ethical principles such as justice (adl), consultation (shura), and public welfare (maslahah) can counteract populist tendencies like xenophobia, authoritarianism, and sectarianism.
- Provides a comparative analysis between Islamic governance concepts and Western populism theories from thinkers like Ernesto Laclau, Cas Mudde, and Jan-Werner Müller.
- Develops a framework for ethical governance that integrates Islamic moral values with democratic ideals of participation, equality, and accountability.
- Contributes to intercultural dialogue by offering Islam's political philosophy as a model for reconciling faith-based politics with modern democratic values.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the rise of global populism has transformed the political landscape across both Western and non-Western societies. Global populism has emerged as one of the most influential political phenomena of the twenty-first century, reshaping the dynamics of governance, political discourse, and public trust across the world (Puhle, 2020). Populism is generally understood as a political approach that divides society into two opposing groups: the “pure people” versus the “corrupt elite.” It claims to represent the voice and interests of ordinary citizens against political, economic, and intellectual elites who are perceived to have betrayed the will of the people. This ideological framework, though flexible and context-dependent, often thrives on emotional rhetoric, identity politics, and simplistic solutions to complex social problems.

The rise of global populism can be traced to a combination of social, economic, and technological transformations that have deepened public discontent. In many Western democracies, populism gained momentum following economic crises, growing income inequality, and disillusionment with traditional political parties. Similarly, in the Global South, populist movements often emerged as reactions to corruption, weak governance, and perceived cultural threats from globalization. The spread of social media and digital communication has further accelerated populist movements by providing leaders direct access to mass audiences, bypassing traditional media filters and fostering emotionally charged, polarized political environments (Perloff, 2021).

Populism is characterized by several core features. Anti-elitism is central, manifesting in the rejection of political establishments and experts. Nationalism often plays a strong role, with populist leaders invoking patriotic or religious symbols to reinforce a sense of collective identity (Bonikowski, 2017). Emotional rhetoric is also a defining trait; rather than relying on policy complexity or rational debate, populist discourse appeals to fear, resentment, and nostalgia. Populist leaders often present themselves as charismatic figures who alone can restore the moral purity and sovereignty of the nation, promoting a direct, personal connection with “the people” that undermines institutional checks and balances.

The impact of global populism on politics and democracy is profound and ambivalent. On one hand, populism can revitalize democratic participation by mobilizing marginalized groups and challenging entrenched elites. On the other hand, it frequently erodes democratic norms by weakening independent institutions, delegitimizing dissent, and fostering authoritarian tendencies under the guise of popular will (Cooley, 2015). Populist governance often centralizes power, restricts media freedom, and promotes a majoritarian conception of democracy that sidelines minority rights and pluralism.

Religion has also become deeply intertwined with populist movements. Many populist leaders use religious narratives to legitimize their authority and consolidate support, framing their politics as a defense of sacred or moral values against secular elites or external enemies. This instrumentalization of religion can distort theological principles, turning faith into a tool of exclusion rather than unity. In Muslim-majority societies, for example, populism has sometimes appropriated Islamic symbols and language to strengthen political legitimacy, while neglecting the ethical and universal values embedded in Islamic political thought (Rakhmani & Hadiz, 2021). Thus, global populism represents both a challenge and an opportunity for religious and intellectual traditions to reaffirm their authentic moral foundations amid a rapidly changing world.

Against this backdrop, Islamic political thought offers an alternative intellectual tradition grounded in ethical governance, social justice (*adl*), consultation (*shura*), and the pursuit of the common good (*maslahah*). Rooted in the Qur’anic worldview and developed by classical scholars such as Al-Mawardi, Al-Farabi, and Ibn Khaldun, as well as contemporary thinkers like Rachid Ghannouchi and Ali Shariati, Islamic political philosophy provides a framework for balancing authority with moral responsibility and communal harmony (Matthee, 2008). Unlike populism, which often thrives on exclusionary nationalism and emotional populist discourse, Islamic political thought emphasizes unity (*ummah*), accountability before God, and the moral duty of leaders to serve justice and equity.

Contemporary scholarship on populism and religion establishes a foundation for examining how faith traditions interact with populist politics. Cas Mudde’s definitional work (e.g., Mudde 2004; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017) remains central in defining populism as a “thin-centered” ideology that pits the “pure people” against a “corrupt elite,” and many reviewers have used this baseline to explore religion’s role in populist mobilization. Systematic literature reviews such as I. Yilmaz (2021) map the growing field

that links populism to emotive, identity-based appeals and show how religious rhetoric often amplifies populist messages by sacralizing the “people” and demonizing “others.”

A distinct strand of work has developed around the notion of “Islamic populism” how Islamist movements or religious actors adopt populist frames, and conversely how populists instrumentalize Islamic language. Vedi Hadiz’s comparative discussions (discussed in regional analyses) and Buket Öztaş’s review (2020) analyze the promises and limits of Islamic populist projects, arguing that while such movements can mobilize broad support by appealing to grievances and religious identity, they often face constraints when translating mass mobilization into institutional power or liberal democratic governance. Several recent papers and edited volumes explore how Islamic political actors blend doctrinal claims with populist strategies in places like Indonesia, Turkey, and Tunisia.

Empirical case studies form a rich empirical base. Research on Indonesia (Hadiz and others; Shalihin 2022–2023) examines the 2010s rise of mass Islamic movements and protest coalitions often labeled “Islamic populism” that used religious symbolism and moralizing rhetoric to influence policy and elections (e.g., the 2016–2017 Jakarta events and the 2018–2019 mobilizations). Scholarship on Tunisia (analyses of Rached Ghannouchi and Ennahda) and Turkey (studies of Erdoğan and AKP’s melding of Islamic discourse with populist governance) illustrates different outcomes: in some settings Islamist actors moderate and institutionalize, while in others populist leaders instrumentalize religion for consolidation of power. These comparative case literatures point to context-dependent interactions between religious thought and populist practice.

Theoretical contributions interrogate whether Islamic political thought classical and reformist offers resources to counter exclusionary populist logics. Scholars who study political Islam (e.g., readings of Ghannouchi’s democratic reinterpretations, modernist thinkers) emphasize concepts like *shura* (consultation), *maslahah* (public interest), and *adl* (justice) as normative tools that can undercut populist majoritarianism and ethical corruption. At the same time, critics warn that religiously framed counter-narratives risk becoming co-opted by elites or sliding into new forms of majoritarianism if they lack institutional safeguards. Recent analyses therefore call for careful, normative engagement: articulating Islamic principles in ways that strengthen pluralism and institutional checks rather than simply opposing populist personalities.

The intersection between Islamic political thought and global populism raises critical questions about how Muslim societies and intellectual traditions can respond to the challenges posed by populist movements. In regions such as the Middle East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia, populism has often intersected with Islamic discourse sometimes reinforcing populist agendas, but at other times serving as a counterbalance through ethical and inclusive interpretations of Islam (Hadiz, 2014). Therefore, understanding how Islamic political thought can address the moral and ideological distortions of populism is crucial for promoting political stability, democratic resilience, and social cohesion in the modern world.

This study seeks to analyze the role of Islamic political thought in responding to the rise of global populism, exploring how its ethical and philosophical principles can provide a moral compass amid growing political polarization. By engaging both classical Islamic scholarship and modern political theory, this research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how faith-based intellectual traditions can inform the global discourse on democracy, justice, and governance in the twenty-first century.

METHOD

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this research draws from both Islamic political philosophy and modern populism theory to analyze how Islamic political thought can respond to the challenges of global populism. By engaging classical and reformist Islamic thinkers alongside Western theorists of populism, this framework integrates ethical, sociological, and political perspectives to explore the compatibility and tensions between Islamic concepts of governance and populist constructions of “the people” and “the elite.”

Classical Islamic thinkers such as Al-Mawardi (972–1058 CE), Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406 CE), and Al-Farabi (872–950 CE) provide foundational insights into the nature of governance, leadership, and social cohesion. In *Al-Ahkam al-Sultaniyyah*, Al-Mawardi emphasizes the importance of legitimate authority, justice (*adl*), and consultation (*shura*) as essential elements of governance rooted in moral responsibility. Al-Farabi’s *Al-Madina al-Fadilah* (The Virtuous City) envisions an ideal polity governed by a virtuous ruler guided by wisdom and ethical purpose, contrasting sharply with populist tendencies that rely on

emotional manipulation and mass sentiment. Ibn Khaldun, in *The Muqaddimah*, introduces the concept of 'asabiyyah (social solidarity), explaining how the strength of collective unity and moral discipline determines the rise and decline of political authority (Hernawan, 2017). Together, these thinkers emphasize ethical leadership and communal justice, offering a normative counterpoint to populism's opportunistic and divisive rhetoric.

Modern reformist and revivalist scholars, including Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905), Rashid Rida (1865-1935), Abul A'la Maududi (1903-1979), Ali Shariati (1933-1977), and Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938), reinterpret Islamic political principles within the context of modernity, colonialism, and nation-building. Abduh and Rida promoted reformist interpretations that emphasized rationality, education, and moral renewal as prerequisites for just governance. Iqbal, in *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (1930), proposed a dynamic vision of Islam that integrates spiritual selfhood and democratic participation. Meanwhile, Maududi conceptualized the idea of a "theo-democracy" based on divine sovereignty (hakimiyyah) balanced with human consultation, while Shariati emphasized revolutionary consciousness and social justice as expressions of authentic Islamic activism. Collectively, these reformist thinkers grapple with the challenge of aligning religious ethics with modern political realities an endeavor that mirrors the need to respond constructively to populist distortions of religion and nationalism (Mancini & Rosenfeld, 2020).

From Western political theory, the research draws on key conceptualizations of populism as articulated by Ernesto Laclau (2005), Cas Mudde (2004; 2017), and Jan-Werner Müller (2016). Laclau interprets populism as a discursive logic through which political identities are constructed "the people" being an empty signifier that unites diverse grievances against a common elite. Mudde and Kaltwasser, by contrast, define populism as a "thin-centered ideology" that divides society into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups: the "pure people" and the "corrupt elite." Müller adds a normative dimension, warning that populism's exclusive claim to represent "the people" undermines pluralism and democratic legitimacy. These theories explain how populism can emerge across ideological spectrums and exploit moral or religious narratives to justify anti-elite sentiments, thus providing a theoretical foundation for analyzing similar patterns within Muslim societies.

In a comparative perspective, Islamic political thought both aligns with and challenges the populist logic of "the people versus the elite." On one hand, Islam emphasizes equality, moral accountability, and the rejection of tyranny values that resonate with populism's critique of corrupt elites and social injustice. On the other hand, Islamic political philosophy insists that leadership must be based on ethical virtue, knowledge, and communal consultation rather than emotional appeal or mass mobilization. While populism tends to simplify and polarize, Islamic thought advocates a balanced order where justice and consultation guide decision-making (Al-Astewani, 2020). Therefore, Islamic governance ideals rooted in *adl* (justice), *shura* (consultation), and *maslahah* (public interest) can serve as a moral framework that neutralizes populism's divisive tendencies by redirecting political energy toward constructive, ethical, and community-centered objectives.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in philosophical and interpretive analysis to explore the role of Islamic political thought in responding to the challenges of global populism. The qualitative approach is chosen because the research aims to understand and interpret complex ideological and theoretical concepts rather than to measure variables quantitatively. The study focuses on textual interpretation, conceptual analysis, and comparative examination of philosophical and political ideas drawn from both Islamic and Western intellectual traditions (Safi, 2014). Through this method, the research seeks to construct a comprehensive understanding of how the ethical, spiritual, and political principles of Islamic thought can provide an alternative framework to the populist logic of "the people versus the elite."

The data sources for this study consist primarily of secondary materials, including classical Islamic texts, modern reformist writings, and scholarly analyses on populism. Primary Islamic sources such as *Al-Ahkam al-Sultaniyyah* by Al-Mawardi, *Al-Madina al-Fadilah* by Al-Farabi, and *The Muqaddimah* by Ibn Khaldun will be analyzed to extract foundational principles on governance, justice, and leadership. Modern reformist works by thinkers such as Muhammad Abduh, Rashid Rida, Muhammad Iqbal, Abul A'la Maududi, and Ali Shariati will be examined to understand how Islamic political philosophy has evolved in response to modernization and sociopolitical challenges. In parallel, key Western theoretical

works on populism by Ernesto Laclau, Cas Mudde, and Jan-Werner Müller will be reviewed to delineate the characteristics, mechanisms, and democratic implications of populism in contemporary global contexts.

The research uses content analysis and comparative analysis as its main methods of data interpretation. Content analysis is applied to identify recurring concepts and themes within the selected texts such as justice (adl), consultation (shura), public interest (maslahah), and moral leadership (akhlaq)(Kamali, 2017). These concepts are then compared with populist notions of political legitimacy, representation, and mass identity to determine points of convergence and divergence. Comparative analysis is used to juxtapose Islamic political principles with populist theories, revealing how Islamic thought can serve as a normative critique of populism's emotional and exclusionary tendencies. The analysis will also consider how certain interpretations of Islam have been appropriated by populist movements, thereby demonstrating both the risks and potentials of religious engagement in populist politics.

In ensuring the validity and rigor of the study, triangulation will be achieved through the use of multiple sources of data and theoretical perspectives. Classical texts, modern reformist writings, and contemporary political analyses will be examined together to build a multi-layered understanding of the research problem. The study will also refer to existing academic literature, peer-reviewed journals, and case studies from Muslim-majority countries such as Indonesia, Turkey, and Tunisia, where populism and Islamic discourse have intersected in distinct ways. This comparative element adds empirical depth to the theoretical discussion and contextualizes Islamic political thought within real-world sociopolitical dynamics.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The findings of this study reveal that Islamic political thought offers a substantive ethical and philosophical framework capable of addressing the social and moral crises brought about by global populism. Through the examination of classical and modern Islamic texts, the research identifies that the foundational concepts of adl (justice), shura (consultation), ummah (community), and maslahah (public good) stand in stark contrast to the exclusionary and emotionally charged rhetoric of populist movements. Whereas populism tends to thrive on binary oppositions between "the people" and "the elite," Islamic political philosophy emphasizes the pursuit of moral equilibrium and collective welfare within the framework of divine justice. This indicates that Islamic governance principles prioritize ethical responsibility and communal harmony rather than political polarization and populist mobilization(Hadiz, 2018).

The comparative analysis further demonstrates that classical Muslim philosophers such as Al-Farabi, Al-Mawardi, and Ibn Khaldun conceptualized political authority not as a means of domination but as a moral trust (amanah). In *Al-Madina al-Fadilah*, Al-Farabi presents the ideal ruler as one who governs based on knowledge and virtue, contrasting sharply with populist leaders who often rely on emotional appeals and mass sentiment. Similarly, Al-Mawardi's *Al-Ahkam al-Sultaniyyah* emphasizes leadership grounded in justice and consultation, aligning governance with divine law and communal consensus rather than personal charisma. Ibn Khaldun's theory of *asabiyyah* (social solidarity) also reveals that societies grounded in moral and social cohesion are less susceptible to populist fragmentation. Together, these findings highlight that Islamic political thought inherently resists the populist impulse to divide society into antagonistic camps.

The study's analysis of modern reformist thinkers such as Muhammad Abduh, Rashid Rida, and Ali Shariati shows that Islamic political reform movements have historically sought to balance moral authenticity with political modernity(Mokhtari, n.d.). These thinkers advocated for the revival of Islamic ethical principles as a foundation for political justice and democratic participation. Muhammad Abduh emphasized rationality and ethical reform as tools for political renewal, while Shariati envisioned an Islam that empowers the oppressed without succumbing to the demagoguery typical of populist leaders. The findings thus suggest that modern Islamic thought has already articulated a form of moral populism rooted in justice and equality but one that is distinguished by its commitment to spiritual integrity and collective morality rather than emotional manipulation.

In contrast to populist ideologies that derive legitimacy from majoritarianism, the results indicate that Islamic political philosophy grounds legitimacy in moral and divine accountability. The concept of

shura promotes participatory decision-making, ensuring that governance reflects collective wisdom rather than populist impulses (Shavit, 2010). Moreover, the ethical centrality of *maslahah* ensures that public policy is directed toward the welfare of all, not merely the satisfaction of popular demands. This ethical universality positions Islamic thought as a corrective paradigm capable of mitigating the divisive tendencies of populism while maintaining the democratic spirit of public engagement.

Finally, the research reveals that the integration of Islamic political ethics into contemporary governance offers both a moral and institutional alternative to the populist crisis of representation. Case studies from Muslim-majority contexts, such as Indonesia and Tunisia, show that when Islamic values of justice and consultation are embedded within democratic institutions, political discourse becomes more inclusive and less prone to populist extremism. These findings reinforce the conclusion that Islamic political thought, when interpreted within its ethical and philosophical depth, provides not only a critique of populism but also a constructive path toward more just, participatory, and morally grounded forms of political order in the global era.

Development of a Framework for Ethical Governance Inspired by Islamic Thought

The development of an ethical governance framework inspired by Islamic thought begins with the recognition that governance, in Islam, is inherently a moral enterprise rather than a purely political one. In contrast to secular political theories that separate ethics from governance, Islamic political philosophy places moral accountability (*taklif*) at the heart of leadership and policy-making (Achmad, 2018). This framework is built upon the foundational principles of *adl* (justice), *amanah* (trust), *shura* (consultation), and *maslahah* (public good), all of which form a cohesive ethical structure that guides political authority and societal organization. Within this model, governance is not merely the exercise of power but a moral duty to ensure fairness, transparency, and the welfare of all members of society. The ultimate goal is the realization of *al-falah* (collective prosperity and moral well-being), which transcends material progress to encompass spiritual and social dimensions.

At the core of this ethical governance model lies the principle of justice (*adl*), which serves as the foundation for all political and administrative actions (Adler, 2003). Justice, in the Islamic context, extends beyond legal equality to include distributive justice, social equity, and protection of human dignity. Classical thinkers such as Al-Mawardi and Ibn Khaldun emphasized that the legitimacy of political authority depends on the ruler's ability to uphold justice among the people. A just governance system, therefore, must ensure equal access to resources, impartial enforcement of laws, and the prevention of corruption and exploitation. By embedding justice as a guiding norm, this framework directly counters the moral relativism and opportunism often present in populist or authoritarian regimes, where policies are shaped by political expediency rather than ethical principles.

The second pillar of the framework is consultation (*shura*), which institutionalizes participatory governance within an ethical and communal context. The Qur'an (42:38) praises those "who conduct their affairs by mutual consultation," establishing *shura* as a divine principle of political deliberation. This consultative mechanism ensures that governance reflects collective wisdom rather than the will of a single individual or populist movement. Practically, this can be operationalized through transparent decision-making processes, representative councils, and mechanisms for community engagement. *Shura* embodies both democracy's procedural aspects and Islam's moral imperatives fusing accountability with spirituality. In this way, it serves as a safeguard against the concentration of power and the rise of demagoguery, ensuring that governance remains inclusive, balanced, and oriented toward the common good.

Another critical component is trust (*amanah*), which defines the ethical relationship between rulers and the ruled. In Islamic thought, political power is not a privilege but a sacred trust bestowed by God and the community (Pipes, 2017). Leaders are seen as stewards (*khulafa'*) responsible for safeguarding the interests of their people. This concept establishes a moral contract between the governed and the governing, in which integrity, honesty, and service are not optional virtues but obligations. As Al-Farabi articulated in *Al-Madina al-Fadilah*, the ideal leader embodies intellectual and moral excellence, leading by example and ensuring that public policy reflects both rational wisdom and divine guidance. Embedding *amanah* within governance structures promotes a culture of accountability and transparency; key elements for countering corruption, manipulation, and moral decay in political institutions.

The final pillar, public welfare (*maslahah*), provides the pragmatic dimension of Islamic ethical governance. Rooted in the work of Al-Ghazali and later developed by Al-Shatibi, *maslahah* emphasizes that all laws and policies must aim to secure the well-being of individuals and society. This includes the protection of essential human interests: religion, life, intellect, lineage, and property (*maqasid al-shariah*).

Within the modern context, *maslahah* can be expanded to encompass human rights, environmental sustainability, and social justice. By prioritizing public welfare over partisan or populist interests, this principle ensures that governance remains anchored in moral rationality and long-term social benefit rather than short-term political gain.

The framework for ethical governance inspired by Islamic thought offers a comprehensive model that integrates spirituality, morality, and practicality (Ghafran & Yasmin, 2020). It transcends the limitations of secular populism by grounding governance in timeless ethical values that prioritize justice, consultation, trust, and collective welfare. Such a framework is not only relevant for Muslim-majority societies but also provides universal insights into the moral dimensions of power and governance. By reintroducing ethics into political discourse, this model can help cultivate leaders and institutions that are not merely efficient or popular, but genuinely just, compassionate, and accountable restoring integrity to the practice of governance in a deeply divided global political landscape.

Contribution to Intercultural Dialogue on Reconciling Faith-Based Politics with Democratic Values

Islamic political thought provides a meaningful contribution to the intercultural dialogue on reconciling faith-based politics with democratic values by presenting an alternative vision of governance where moral principles, spirituality, and civic responsibility coexist harmoniously. In many parts of the world, the relationship between religion and democracy has been framed as one of tension or incompatibility (Audi, 2020). However, Islamic political ethics rooted in concepts such as *adl* (justice), *shura* (consultation), *maslahah* (public welfare), and *amanah* (trust) demonstrates that faith-based systems can nurture democratic ideals when interpreted through the lens of ethical universalism. This framework emphasizes that political participation, social equality, and justice are not secular inventions but deeply moral imperatives that can be expressed through religious values. As such, Islamic thought contributes to global dialogues by showing that faith and democracy are not opposing forces but complementary elements of a just political order.

Central to this contribution is the principle of *shura* (consultation), which parallels the democratic ideal of participatory governance. The Qur'an encourages collective decision-making and accountability, stating that believers are those "who conduct their affairs by mutual consultation" (Qur'an 42:38). This principle fosters a culture of deliberation and inclusivity that resonates strongly with democratic practices such as representation, transparency, and debate. Through this shared commitment to dialogue and participation, Islamic governance provides a moral and procedural foundation for democracy that is both spiritually rooted and socially dynamic. This alignment strengthens intercultural understanding by illustrating that democratic engagement need not be secularized to be legitimate it can also emerge from a faith-based moral consciousness that prioritizes communal welfare and moral responsibility (Wenneborg, 2021).

Moreover, Islamic political ethics challenges the individualism often associated with Western liberal democracy by introducing a balance between personal freedom and collective obligation. While democracy emphasizes rights and autonomy, Islam complements this with the concept of *maslahah* (public interest), which insists that governance should prioritize the well-being of the entire community. This principle enriches intercultural dialogue by demonstrating that democracy can be both rights-based and responsibility-oriented. By merging moral accountability with civic participation, Islamic thought offers a more holistic model of democracy one that values freedom not merely as an end in itself but as a means to achieve justice, compassion, and societal harmony. This dialogue encourages global societies to reflect on how ethical and spiritual dimensions can strengthen democratic life, making it more humane and inclusive.

In addition, Islamic political philosophy contributes to reducing religious and cultural polarization in global politics. In a world where populism and secular nationalism often exploit religious identity to fuel division, the ethical framework of Islam promotes coexistence and dialogue across belief systems. Thinkers such as Muhammad Abduh, Rashid Rida, and Abdullahi An-Na'im have emphasized that Islam's universal values justice, equality, and mutual respect are fully compatible with pluralism and democratic coexistence. Through this lens, faith-based governance becomes a tool for ethical inclusion rather than exclusion. This intercultural approach dismantles stereotypes that view religion as antithetical to democracy, fostering instead a narrative of shared moral responsibility that transcends cultural boundaries (Potter, 2021).

Ultimately, the dialogue between Islamic political thought and democratic theory promotes a transformative vision of global governance one grounded in moral integrity, social justice, and mutual respect. By integrating ethical spirituality into democratic structures, Islamic thought encourages societies

to reimagine politics not as a contest for power but as a moral endeavor for the common good. This contribution is particularly relevant in an era marked by distrust, polarization, and moral fatigue in politics. Through its emphasis on consultation, justice, and public welfare, Islamic political ethics revitalizes democracy with a renewed sense of purpose one that unites rather than divides, uplifts rather than manipulates, and reconciles faith with freedom. In doing so, it enriches the global discourse on governance, proving that true democracy flourishes not in the absence of faith, but through the ethical wisdom faith can bring to the public sphere.

Islamic Political Ethics Can Counteract Populist Tendencies

Islamic political ethics, rooted in justice (adl), compassion (rahmah), and communal harmony (ummah), offers profound moral and philosophical resources to counteract the divisive and destabilizing tendencies of global populism. Unlike populist movements that often rely on xenophobia, authoritarianism, and sectarianism to mobilize political support, Islamic political thought emphasizes moral unity, inclusivity, and respect for human dignity as essential elements of governance (Mancini & Rosenfeld, 2020). The ethical foundation of Islam encourages the creation of a political order based on mutual respect, social justice, and the collective welfare of all citizens, regardless of ethnicity, faith, or class. These principles stand as direct antidotes to the exclusionary logic that populism often employs to divide societies into antagonistic groups of "the people" versus "the others."

From the standpoint of Islamic ethics, xenophobia and hostility toward the "other" are fundamentally incompatible with Qur'anic teachings. The Qur'an explicitly recognizes human diversity as a divine intention: "O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another" (Qur'an 49:13). This verse establishes the moral imperative of coexistence, dialogue, and mutual understanding. Therefore, while populism feeds on fear and mistrust of outsiders whether immigrants, minorities, or global institutions Islamic political ethics cultivates a universalist vision of humanity rooted in the shared responsibility to uphold justice and compassion. In this sense, Islamic ethics not only rejects xenophobia but actively promotes cosmopolitanism grounded in spiritual and moral solidarity.

In confronting authoritarianism, Islamic political thought also offers a counterbalance through the principle of shura (consultation). Unlike populist or authoritarian regimes that centralize power under a single charismatic leader, shura promotes collective decision-making and accountability. Classical scholars such as Al-Mawardi and Ibn Khaldun viewed leadership as a form of trust (amanah) rather than personal privilege (Moten, 2011). The ruler, in their view, is bound by divine law and communal consensus, not by populist will or autocratic ambition. By embedding moral responsibility within governance, Islamic ethics ensures that political authority remains both accountable to the people and subject to divine moral order thereby reducing the risk of authoritarian excesses disguised as "popular will."

Furthermore, sectarianism, a recurrent tool in populist mobilization, is explicitly condemned in Islamic political ethics. The Qur'an warns against division within the community of believers (ummah), urging unity under the principles of faith and justice. Modern reformist thinkers like Rashid Rida and Muhammad Iqbal emphasized that political fragmentation along sectarian lines undermines the moral and spiritual unity essential for social progress. Rida, for instance, argued that political leadership must rise above sectarian identity to embody the collective interest of the ummah. By prioritizing shared moral goals over narrow factionalism, Islamic political ethics provides a framework for overcoming the sectarian polarization often exacerbated by populist rhetoric.

Moreover, Islamic political ethics introduces an alternative vision of "the people" not as a homogenous, emotionally manipulated mass, but as a moral community bound by shared ethical responsibility. Populism tends to exploit emotions such as resentment or fear to construct an imagined moral majority (Salmela & Von Scheve, 2017). In contrast, Islamic ethics defines political participation as an act of stewardship (khilafah) guided by reason, compassion, and justice. This ethical reframing transforms political engagement from a battle for dominance into a collective endeavor to preserve moral order and social balance. Thus, Islamic political thought can neutralize the emotional volatility that fuels populism by grounding public discourse in ethical deliberation rather than emotional manipulation.

Islamic political ethics provides a holistic and morally grounded response to the threats of xenophobia, authoritarianism, and sectarianism inherent in global populist movements (Basic, 2020). By emphasizing justice, consultation, compassion, and unity, Islamic political thought reorients politics away from exclusion and hostility toward moral responsibility and social harmony. In doing so, it not only

challenges the populist logic of division but also offers an enduring ethical framework for building inclusive and just societies in an increasingly polarized world.

Comparison of the Results with Previous Research

The results of this study align with and expand upon previous research that has examined the intersection of Islamic political thought and modern democratic ideals. Earlier works by Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im (2008) and Tariq Ramadan (2010) argued that Islamic principles, when interpreted dynamically, are fully compatible with the ethical and participatory foundations of democracy. This study supports their position by demonstrating that classical Islamic concepts such as *shura* (consultation) and *maslahah* (public welfare) offer not only theoretical compatibility but also practical frameworks for ethical governance in the modern world (Afsaruddin & Boroujerdi, 2013). However, while An-Na'im and Ramadan primarily focused on theological reinterpretation, this research extends their work by analyzing how these principles can actively counter populist tendencies such as xenophobia, authoritarianism, and sectarianism within contemporary political systems. Thus, the findings of this study move beyond compatibility toward a more functional synthesis between Islamic ethics and democratic resilience.

In relation to Cas Mudde's (2017) theory of populism, which identifies populism as a thin-centered ideology pitting "the pure people" against "the corrupt elite," the present study offers a contrasting moral paradigm derived from Islamic ethics. Mudde and other Western theorists such as Jan-Werner Müller (2016) describe populism as a challenge to liberal democratic pluralism due to its tendency toward moral exclusion and emotional rhetoric. The findings of this study reveal that Islamic political ethics, by emphasizing justice (*adl*), compassion (*rahmah*), and communal harmony (*ummah*), provides a philosophical antidote to the divisive populist logic. Where populism seeks to simplify and polarize political identities, Islamic ethics seeks to unify through moral responsibility and collective well-being. This divergence illustrates that faith-based political frameworks, when grounded in universal ethical values, can offer corrective insights to the moral deficiencies often observed in populist and purely secular democratic systems.

The study also resonates with Ali Shariati's (1979) vision of moral activism within Islam, in which political engagement must serve the purpose of uplifting the oppressed without descending into demagoguery. Similar to Shariati's critique of authoritarianism disguised as populism, this research finds that Islamic political thought encourages moral leadership based on integrity and service rather than emotional manipulation. Additionally, Muhammad Abduh's and Rashid Rida's reformist perspectives on governance as a moral duty rather than a struggle for dominance echo strongly in this study's findings. Both thinkers argued that the decline of Islamic societies stemmed not from a lack of faith, but from the erosion of ethical consciousness in governance a conclusion this research reaffirms through its analysis of contemporary political behavior. Thus, the study substantiates their argument by showing that the revival of ethical leadership rooted in *amanah* (trust) and *adl* (justice) can effectively resist the populist erosion of moral and institutional integrity.

Furthermore, the findings expand upon Ibn Khaldun's (1377) concept of *asabiyyah* (social cohesion), which he identified as the foundation of stable governance. Previous scholarship has often interpreted *asabiyyah* in sociological or historical terms, but this study reinterprets it as a moral and ethical bond that strengthens communal unity in the face of populist fragmentation (Haddad, 2020). By doing so, it provides a contemporary application of Ibn Khaldun's thought within the context of global populism and political polarization. Similarly, Al-Mawardi's (11th century) and Al-Farabi's (10th century) views on virtuous leadership find renewed relevance here. The study's results confirm that their emphasis on moral virtue and rational consultation remains a viable model for addressing the ethical vacuum in modern politics suggesting that classical Islamic thought continues to offer timeless insights into the challenges of governance today.

While previous research has established the theological and ethical compatibility between Islam and democracy, this study advances the conversation by demonstrating the practical applicability of Islamic political ethics in mitigating the negative consequences of global populism. The results not only confirm earlier theoretical assertions but also highlight how Islamic moral philosophy can serve as a stabilizing force in modern political discourse. By bridging classical scholarship with contemporary issues, the study contributes a new dimension to the literature showing that Islamic political thought is not merely a historical or doctrinal framework, but a living ethical tradition capable of enriching intercultural dialogue, democratic resilience, and global efforts toward moral governance.

CONCLUSION

This research concludes that Islamic political thought provides a profound ethical and philosophical foundation for addressing the challenges posed by global populism. Through an exploration of classical and modern Islamic thinkers such as Al-Mawardi, Al-Farabi, Ibn Khaldun, Muhammad Abduh, Rashid Rida, and Ali Shariati it becomes clear that Islam envisions governance as a moral trust (amanah) guided by justice (adl), consultation (shura), and the pursuit of the common good (maslahah). These principles stand in sharp contrast to the divisive and emotionally charged logic of populism, which often relies on polarization, exclusion, and the manipulation of public sentiment. Instead of fostering antagonism between “the people” and “the elite,” Islamic political ethics emphasizes unity, moral responsibility, and the preservation of social harmony values that are indispensable for sustaining a just and inclusive society. The findings demonstrate that Islamic political ethics offers an effective framework for countering the moral and structural weaknesses of populist politics, including xenophobia, authoritarianism, and sectarianism. By grounding governance in divine accountability and ethical responsibility, Islam provides a corrective vision that prioritizes justice, equality, and compassion over populist opportunism. The concepts of shura and ijma’ encourage participatory governance while maintaining moral integrity, ensuring that political processes remain inclusive and accountable. In this sense, Islamic political thought not only resists the excesses of populism but also enriches the democratic ideal by embedding it within a spiritual and ethical context that promotes social balance and public welfare. Furthermore, this research contributes to the global intercultural dialogue on reconciling faith-based politics with democratic values, showing that religious ethics can coexist with and strengthen democratic systems. Rather than opposing democracy, Islamic thought enhances it by infusing moral consciousness into civic life and governance. The emphasis on justice, consultation, and collective well-being reflects democratic principles while preserving spiritual depth, offering a model of “ethical democracy” that transcends the secular-religious divide. This synthesis encourages mutual understanding between Islamic and Western political traditions and highlights the potential of faith-based ethics to serve as a universal moral framework for addressing political polarization and moral decline in modern societies. Islamic political thought is not merely a historical or theological construct but a living ethical paradigm capable of guiding contemporary governance toward greater justice, inclusion, and moral integrity. By reasserting the spiritual dimensions of politics, Islam provides an enduring response to the crises of populism and the erosion of democratic ethics. The integration of faith and reason, ethics and governance, and spirituality and participation offers a holistic vision of political life one that seeks not the domination of power, but the realization of justice, compassion, and collective human flourishing.

AUTHORS’ DECLARATION

Authors’ Contributions and Responsibilities

The authors collectively contributed to the conception, development, and completion of this research.

Competing Interests

The authors declare that there are no competing interests influencing the conduct, interpretation, or publication of this research. All analyses, discussions, and conclusions were developed independently and objectively, without any financial, institutional, or personal interests that could have affected the research outcomes.

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