


## RESEARCH NOTE

# Can Religion Save Corrupt Politicians? Evidence from Indonesia

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### Abstract

Does endorsing an Islamist agenda protect a candidate involved in corruption from negative voter evaluations? The corruption literature suggests that voter reactions to corruption are not unbiased and as such Islamist agendas could potentially mitigate the negative effects of a corruption scandal, especially in religious societies. The political Islam literature suggests that endorsing an Islamist agenda would not shield corrupt politicians from negative reactions of the voters. We directly answer this question through 2 nationally representative survey experiments in the world's most populous Muslim democracy Indonesia. Our findings are 2-fold. First, Islamist agendas, in general, have only little effects on voter support for a candidate. Second, voters punish corrupt candidates equally, regardless whether or not they endorse an Islamist agenda.

*Key words:* corruption; political Islam; survey experiment; religion; Indonesia

Office-seeking politicians facing a corruption scandal often employ various strategies to garner voters' sympathy and maintain their support. In religious societies, a particularly common form of such strategies takes shape in religious populism, where politicians emphasize their religious identities or champion religious agendas to mitigate the negative effects of the scandal they face (Buehler, 2016; Hamid, 2018; Lancaster, 2014; Orjuela, 2014). Although the political relevance of religion has been documented in various settings (Grzymala-Busse, 2012; Wald et al., 2005), this research note focuses on Muslim-majority countries where religion has been known to play important roles in political and public affairs (Fox, 2020).

There are multiple instances of politicians in Muslim countries advancing religious agendas when faced with a corruption scandal. For example, facing corruption allegations in the 1Malaysia Development Berhad scandal, the then prime minister of Malaysia Najib Razak advocated an implementation of strict and extreme version of Islamic laws that included stoning and amputation to shore up support among the Muslim Malay voters, stating that “We want to develop Islam” and that “Non-Muslims must understand that this is . . . about empowering the sharia courts.” (Sipalan, 2016, para. 4–5). In another example, Yilmaz and Bashirov (2018) show how religious agendas were employed to shield the Turkish Justice and Development Party’s politicians from negative corruption scandals. These examples mean that our study not only offers theoretical and empirical contribution to the literature, but also answers practical, real-world politics concerns regarding politics and religion.

Can endorsing an Islamist agenda protect a candidate involved in a corruption scandal from negative voter evaluations? Despite anecdotal evidence regarding the prevalence of such religious populism and arguments about how religion and corruption often intertwine (De La O & Rodden, 2008; Gokcekus & Ekici, 2020; Marquette et al., 2014; Orjuela, 2014), to our knowledge, no study has provided a direct empirical answer to this question. In fact, the literature on corruption and the literature on political Islam seem to offer competing answers.

The literature on corruption highlights how voter evaluations of a corrupt politician are not unbiased. Voters are more forgiving of corrupt politicians who share their political views (Anduiza et al., 2013; Solaz et al., 2019). This suggests that religious agendas, at least in religious societies, may indeed protect corrupt politicians from negative voter evaluations. On the other hand, the literature on political Islam suggests that the effects of Islamist labels and agendas are generally minimal (Grewal et al., 2019; Kurzman & Türkoğlu, 2015; Pepinsky et al., 2012; Sumaktoyo et al., 2016). Islamist cues matter only to the extent that voters are uncertain about the candidate’s or the party’s economic performance. If voters perceive a candidate or a party negatively (e.g., as being corrupt), then Islamist cues would have no effects.

We fill this gap in the literature and test these competing predictions by fielding two nationally representative survey experiments in the world’s most populous Muslim-majority country Indonesia. Our primary survey varies the corruption information and the religious (Islamist) agenda of a political candidate. This setup enables us to examine how voters respond to different combinations of corruption and religious rhetoric. Our secondary survey utilizes a different issue to validate that the effect of Islamist agenda is indeed minimal.

Our study contributes to the literature in two regards. First, our experiment enables us to show, with a strong causal validity, how voters would behave on the normative level in response to a candidate’s corruption and religious rhetoric. Normative responses may or may not correspond to real-life politics (Boas et al., 2019; Incerti, 2020). However, they are paramount to illuminate the basic principles of voting behavior at work by showcasing what voters consider desirable or undesirable (McDermott, 2011).

Second, our study contributes to the political Islam literature by addressing a scarcity in the study of corruption and political behavior in Muslim countries. Political Islam literature has been dominated by studies on voting behavior (Grewal et al., 2019; Kurzman & Türkoğlu, 2015), protest and violence (e.g., Fair et al., 2012; Hoffman & Jamal, 2014), or intolerance and discrimination (Sumaktoyo, 2020). Despite the

prevalence of corruption in many Muslim countries (Rehman & Askari, 2010), ironically little attention has been devoted to corruption and *electoral behavior*.

A study by Kalin and Siddiqui (2016), examining how religion and corruption interact to shape voter support in Pakistan, is a notable exception. However, their study is different from ours in three ways. First, their religiosity treatment emphasized personal religiosity (piety) of the candidate, whereas ours is about the effect of political religiosity or endorsement of an Islamist agenda. Second, their corruption treatment tapped more on personal integrity, describing the candidate as failing to pay taxes and lying about university degree, whereas ours is strictly on corruption. Last, their study, by explicitly describing the candidate as either Sunni or Shia, included an important third factor besides religiosity and corruption: sectarianism. We are able to avoid this sectarian angle as sectarian identity is not as salient in Indonesia. A survey of Indonesian Muslims by the Pew Research Center (2013) finds that only 28% identified as Sunni while the majority (about 67%) described themselves as “just Muslim.”

Our findings are twofold. First, consistent with previous studies on corruption, we find that portraying a candidate as corrupt hurts voter support for the candidate. However, we find no effect of Islamist rhetoric. A religious agenda neither hurts nor helps the candidate. Second, we find that the negative effect of corruption is similar regardless whether or not the candidate engages in Islamist rhetoric. Supplementary analyses show that this lack of effect holds up even among religious voters and voters supportive of political Islam.

### Corruption and religion

That voters would be less likely to support a corrupt candidate is well documented in survey settings (Incerti, 2020). Given the negative economic consequences of corruption, voters may punish a corrupt candidate because they perceive the candidate as a threat to their economic interests. Furthermore, since corruption is both immoral and criminal, voters may perceive corrupt candidates as lacking in integrity and consequently reject them. We, therefore, expect that a corrupt candidate would receive lower support than a noncorrupt candidate.

Hypothesis 1: Corruption information decreases support for a candidate.

Predictions concerning the effect of an Islamist agenda are more mixed, reflecting the diverging views in the literature. The first view argues for an Islamist electoral advantage. Islamist actors should receive more support due to their clean image and provision of social services (Brooke, 2019; Henderson & Kuncoro, 2011). Islamist actors' religious labels also place them in a better position to offer an intangible reward: heaven. Although they might not receive direct rewards or obtain the desired good governance, some voters may vote Islamist in expectation of a divine reward (Grewal et al., 2019).

The second viewpoint is that of no advantage or of conditional electoral advantage for Islamist actors (Kurzman & Türkoğlu, 2015; Pepinsky et al., 2012). Islamist actors are associated with good public services delivery (Cammatt & Luong, 2014) and being religious is generally associated with positive things (Randolph-Seng & Nielsen, 2007). Yet, these associations by themselves carry no electoral benefits. Their utility is constrained to conditions of uncertainty when voters are uncertain about a candidate's performance. In such an uncertainty, voters have to infer a candidate's future

performance and the candidate's religious view often serves as a ready cue. If other cues are more salient and the voters are quite certain about the candidate's performance, religious labels, and agendas would not matter as much.

Hypothesis 2A: Embracing an Islamist agenda leads to higher voter support.

Hypothesis 2B: There is no effect of embracing an Islamist agenda.

To our knowledge no studies have directly examined how corruption and Islamist agenda interact with each other to shape voter preference. Nonetheless, we can derive from the literature two predictions. The first is a *religious protection effect* in which the negative effect of corruption is weaker for the Islamist candidate. Religious agendas can signal religious identity which would be welcome by religious voters in typically religious Muslim societies (Pew Research Center, 2013). Research also has established the partisan nature of corruption evaluation. Voters are more forgiving of corrupt politicians who share their political views (Anduiza et al., 2013; Solaz et al., 2019). It is thus possible that in religious societies voters would be more forgiving of corruption if done by a candidate who embraces religious agendas (and in doing so signals his or her own religiousness) as opposed to one who does not.

The second possibility is a *simple null interaction effect*. Religious labels and agendas are particularly effectual in the condition of incomplete information (Pepinsky et al., 2012). The more information the voters have, the less influence religious information would have (Weber & Thornton, 2012). In that sense, corruption information should outweigh any effect that religious agendas might have. Regardless whether or not the candidate is an Islamist, the decrease in electoral support induced by a corruption scandal would be about the same.

Hypothesis 3A: The negative effect of corruption would be weaker for the Islamist candidate.

Hypothesis 3B: The negative effect of corruption would be the same for Islamist and non-Islamist candidates.

### The case: Indonesia

We test our hypotheses in the context of the world's largest Muslim democracy Indonesia. The country promises real-world validity due to the salience of both corruption and Islamist agendas. A recent survey finds that >70% of the respondents thought that the level of corruption had stayed the same or actually worsened during the past 2 years (Lembaga Survei Indonesia, 2018). Endorsement of Islamist agendas is also a relatively common electoral strategy (Buehler, 2016; Tanuwidjaja, 2010). All these suggest that the issues examined in this study are of relevance to the respondents. Furthermore, there is also the reason that Indonesia's elections are relatively free and fair. Candidates and parties compete for votes either through promises or more illicit means such as vote buying (Muhtadi, 2019). This means voter preferences matter and that it is important to understand the factors that shape these preferences.

### Data and design

We embedded our primary experiment in a nationally representative face-to-face survey of Indonesian voters in January 2020. The sampling followed a standard procedure of

political surveys in Indonesia (Mujani et al., 2018) and is described in the [Supplementary Appendix](#). We interviewed 2,020 respondents with 88.8% response rate. As politicians logically employ Islamist agendas to appeal to Muslim voters, to maintain the validity of our treatment we restricted our analysis to the 1,840 Muslim respondents.

We employed a  $2 \times 2$  design, combining a two-level corruption treatment (no corruption info or corrupt) with a two-level Islamist treatment (no Islamist agenda or with an Islamist agenda). Respondents were read:

Suppose that there is a candidate for the regent/mayoral position in your area who has a business background [and is suspected to be involved in a corruption scandal]. If elected, this candidate promises to expand employment [and gives ulema bigger roles in policymaking]. Will you vote for the candidate? Responses were binary choices of Yes/No.

Of all Muslim respondents, 451 (24.5%) were presented with the corrupt non-Islamist candidate description, 460 (25%) with the noncorrupt non-Islamist description, 459 (24.9%) with the corrupt Islamist description, and 470 (25.5%) with the noncorrupt Islamist description. The groups were balanced on various covariates (see [Supplementary Appendix](#)).

We focus on giving bigger roles to ulema as the Islamist agenda of interest due to its relevance to Indonesia. First, the issue has its supporters and opponents. [Fossati et al. \(2020\)](#) find that 47% of Indonesian political elites and 37% of the public agree that ulema should play a very important role in politics. This variation means we can reasonably expect a treatment effect (compared with, for instance, if there is unanimous support or opposition toward it).

Second, among the policymakers themselves, ulema has a disproportionately large influence. For example, [Crouch \(2011\)](#) finds how the court often refers to fatwas from the Indonesian Council of Ulema when trying blasphemy cases, despite the council is essentially a civil society organization with no legal recognition in the Indonesia's constitutional law. In the electoral context, securing support from ulema has become one of the things that any reasonable candidates need to do. Even the current president, Joko Widodo, picked the cleric Ma'ruf Amin as his running mate, despite the latter's lack of experience in government.

The perceptive reader might wonder whether describing the candidate as promising to expand employment would dampen the effect of the ulema agenda by signaling a positive economic performance ([Pepinsky et al., 2012](#)). This is an interesting scenario and, without a new experiment, we cannot fully rule out this possibility. However, we argue that the likelihood of this explanation driving our results is likely low for two reasons. First, expanding employment is a common electoral promise. This should decrease the possibility that the promise signaling a positive or a negative performance. Second, we explicitly described in the wording that it is a *promise* and, at least in politics, a promise may or may not get fulfilled. This is different from [Pepinsky et al. \(2012\)](#) who explicitly describe the performance as either positive, negative, or uncertain.

## Analysis

For ease of interpretation, we employed ordinary least squares models that take into account the sampling weight, presenting the results as [Table 1](#). Substantively identical results from logistic regression models are available in the [Supplementary Appendix](#). Models 1 and 2 from the January 2020 survey are our main models. [Figure 1](#) presents the predicted voting likelihood for the four experimental groups, as well as the marginal effects of the two treatments and of the corruption treatment for different levels of ulema treatment, based on these Models 1 and 2.

The corruption treatment significantly decreases support for the candidate by an average of 59 points. This large effect corresponds to previous studies documenting a strong norm against corruption ([Boas et al., 2019](#); [Incerti, 2020](#)). To the contrary, we find a null effect of the ulema treatment. Our power calculation suggests that our sample size was sufficient to detect an effect of the ulema treatment with 80% power if only the treatment had decreased or increased support for the candidate by 5.5 points.

We also find that the strength of the negative effect of corruption does not depend on whether or not the candidate is Islamist, as evidenced by the nonstatistically significant interaction effect in Model 2. Our simulation indicates that our sample size was sufficient to detect at 80% power a religious protection effect where the effect of corruption information is about 10 points smaller for an Islamist than a non-Islamist candidate.

Models 3–8 in [Table 1](#) present robustness tests for our findings. Models 3–6 examine if the magnitudes of the treatment effects and of the interaction term significantly vary by how religious the respondents are. In Models 3 and 4, we focus on personal religiosity, operationalized as “how often respondents considered religion when making important decisions in their lives”<sup>1</sup> (never) to 4 (always or routinely). Models 5 and 6 focus on support for political Islam (SPI) as a more political operationalization of religiosity. We operationalize SPI as whether or not the respondent reported voting for an Islamist party in the last general election in April 2019—9 months before the survey.<sup>1</sup> In none of these models, do we see personal religiosity and support for political Islam moderate the treatment effects or the interaction between the treatments. This suggests that the findings presented in [Figure 1](#) do not significantly vary between the less religious and the more religious respondents.

Models 7 and 8 examine whether the null effect of our Islamist treatment is replicable. Although not without precedence (e.g., [Kurzman & Türkoğlu, 2015](#); [Pepinsky et al., 2012](#)), the general lack of effect of our ulema treatment might raise a concern. Was our Islamist treatment too strong that it was not appealing to the respondents? To address this concern, we fielded a reduced-form of our design in another nationally representative survey in August 2020.

The follow-up survey was done by phone and interviewed an independent, smaller sample of 1,220 respondents, of which 1,102 were Muslim. Due to the smaller sample, we dropped the corruption treatment and kept the Islamist agenda treatment, changing it from advocating bigger roles for ulema to supporting an implementation of Islamic (sharia) laws. The treatment now read:

<sup>1</sup>We followed the common classification of parties in Indonesian politics ([Mujani et al., 2018](#); [Pepinsky et al., 2012](#)), counting as Islamist parties the Prosperous Justice Party, the United Development Party, and the Crescent Star Party.

Table 1.

OLS Regression Models.

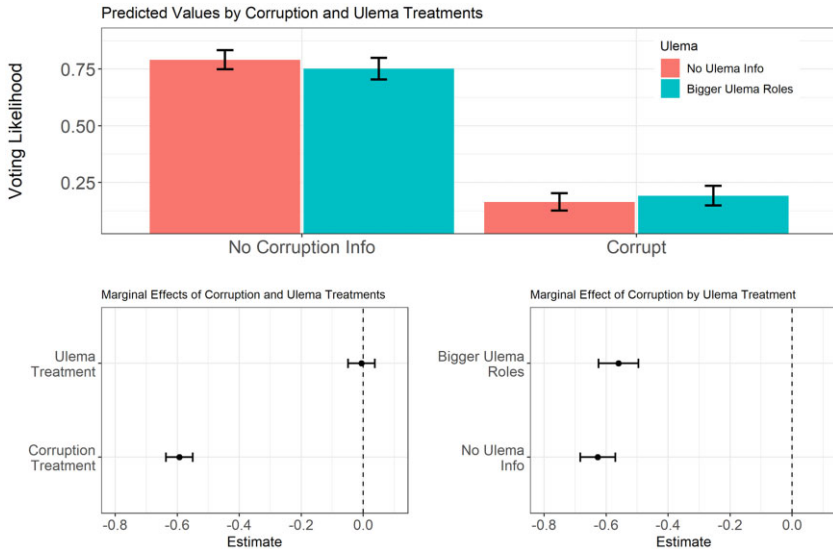
Variable	January 2020 survey				August 2020 survey			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8
Corruption Treatment	-0.593 (0.022)***	-0.627 (0.020)***	-0.507 (0.112)***	-0.398 (0.154)**	-0.585 (0.026)***	-0.622 (0.034)***		
Islamist Treatment	-0.006 (0.022)	-0.039 (0.033)	0.013 (0.033)	0.123 (0.175)	0.003 (0.026)	-0.033 (0.037)	-0.001 (0.035)	-0.244 (0.162)
Corrupt*Islamist		0.067 (0.044)		-0.228 (0.226)		0.074 (0.051)		
Consider Religion			0.010 (0.030)	0.030 (0.035)				-0.147*** (0.037)
Corrupt*Consider Religion			-0.026 (0.034)	-0.070 (0.045)				
Islamist*Consider Religion			-0.006 (0.034)	-0.051 (0.053)				0.078 (0.052)
Corrupt*Islamist*Consider Religion				0.092 (0.068)				
Support for Political Islam					-0.081 (0.074)	-0.134 (0.090)		
Corrupt*Political Islam					-0.011 (0.073)	0.096 (0.110)		
Islamist*Political Islam					0.019 (0.072)	0.129 (0.118)		
Corrupt*Islamist*Political Islam						-0.218 (0.143)		
(Intercept)	0.774 (0.019)***	0.791 (0.022)***	0.740 (0.102)***	0.692 (0.121)***	0.775*** (0.022)	0.793 (0.024)***	0.680 (0.025)***	1.146 (0.111)***
Observations	1,731	1,731	1,722	1,722	1,446	1,446	931	826
R <sup>2</sup>	0.353	0.354	0.351	0.353	0.347	0.348	0.000	0.025
R <sup>2</sup> adjusted	0.353	0.353	0.349	0.350	0.344	0.345	0.001	0.021

\*p &lt; .05;

\*\*\*p &lt; .01;

\*\*\*p &lt; .001;

Figure 1.  
*Voting likelihood and marginal effects of the treatments.*



Suppose that there is a candidate for the regent/mayoral position in your area who has a business background. If elected, this candidate promises to expand employment [and supports sharia laws]. Will you vote for the candidate?

In addition to being a common electoral strategy (Buehler, 2016), endorsing sharia laws is also less controversial than advocating for bigger roles of ulema in public affairs as the laws are often framed as targeting morality issues (e.g., sale of alcoholic beverages, regulation of nightlife).

Model 7 presents the main effect of the sharia endorsement treatment and Model 8 presents a model that interacts the sharia treatment with respondent religiosity. As in our main survey, we find that endorsing sharia only has little electoral effect and that this effect is not conditioned by how religious the respondent is.

## Discussion

The findings we presented offer two contributions to the literature and highlight an avenue for future research. First, we are adding to a growing number of studies that have identified limited electoral benefits of Islamist labels and ideologies (Mujani et al., 2018; Pepinsky et al., 2012) or of personal piety (Kalin & Siddiqui, 2016). We demonstrate that these minimal effects hold up even when we use endorsement of an Islamist agenda as the religious cue.

Why, then, politicians engage in religious rhetoric and endorse religious agendas if the benefits are minimal? One possibility is that because that is what everyone else does. If virtually all candidates portray themselves as religious by embracing different religious agendas (Tanuwidjaja, 2010), a candidate not doing the same could be regarded as the odd one. In that sense, religious agendas might be more of an effort to avoid controversies than to make gains.



Second, our study also contributes to the corruption literature by highlighting a limit of partisan bias in corruption evaluations. Our findings suggest that corruption significantly shapes voter evaluation, even when an issue as personal and as polarizing as religion is involved. This conforms to existing studies on the primacy of economic considerations. Voters prefer Islamist to non-Islamist parties only if they are uncertain about the parties' economic performances (Pepinsky et al., 2012) or if they experience hardship (Grewal et al., 2019). That economic factors strongly condition religious cues should allay concerns about religion acting as opium that prevents the public from demanding accountability (Gokcekus & Ekici, 2020).

At the same time, contrary to Kalin and Siddiqui (2016), we do not find that the Islamist candidate was being punished more severely than the non-Islamist candidate for the corruption scandal. This might reflect the different foci of the religiosity treatments. As mentioned, Kalin and Siddiqui focus on personal piety while we focus on endorsement of an Islamist agenda. Voters might perceive piety as being more closely tied to personal integrity and Islamist agendas as being mostly an electoral strategy not immediately related to the character of the person. Corruption information likely would look more negative if respondents already perceived the candidate as claiming to have high integrity.

Last, our findings and experimental design highlight an avenue for future research. Our design unequivocally provides the corruption information. As politicians' first response to corruption allegations is generally to deny them, we believe it would be fruitful to explore the roles of corruption denials. Denials would create information overflow, making it difficult for voters to keep track of what is happening. Such an information overflow can increase uncertainty and, in turn, voter reliance on heuristic processing, including one that is based on group identification and partisan cues (Anduiza et al., 2013; Pepinsky et al., 2012; Solaz et al., 2019).

In the case of corruption and political Islam, it is possible that the effect of Islamist agendas would be stronger if voters are presented with information about a candidate's corruption allegation *and* denials, as opposed to only the former as our study has done. The level of uncertainty in a design that incorporates both allegations and denials arguably would be high and that might force respondents to rely on ideological and partisan cues more heavily. Future studies may want to explore this possibility and, in doing so, contributes to our collective understanding of how voters respond to information about corruption and identity politics.

### Supplementary Data

Supplementary Data are available at *IJPOR* online.

*Conflicts of interest:* None declared.

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