

Populist and Narratives in Viral Digital Content: A Conceptual Review of Islamic Political Communication in Indonesia

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Abstract

Purpose— This article develops a conceptual framework for analyzing the relationship between populist Islam, narratives of resistance against evil, and viral digital da'wah content in Indonesian Islamic political communication. The problem is significant because digital da'wah in Indonesia no longer functions only as religious instruction; it increasingly participates in the circulation of moral emotions, public grievance, political identity, and collective mobilization through platform-driven visibility.

Design/methods— This study uses a critical conceptual review by synthesizing scholarship on Islamic populism, political communication, digital religion, framing, moral panic, affective publics, and Islamic ethical-political concepts such as amar ma'ruf nahi munkar, hisbah, maslahah, and adab al-ikhtilaf. Rather than conducting content analysis of particular accounts or videos, the article reconstructs an analytical model for distinguishing legitimate Islamic moral criticism from populist moral polarization in viral da'wah communication.

Findings— The article argues that viral digital da'wah becomes Islamic political communication when religious messages construct an emotionally charged opposition between a morally pure ummah and a threatening source of evil, while platform metrics reward simplification, urgency, conflict, and shareability. Resistance against evil is not inherently problematic in Islamic communication; it becomes politically risky when it removes proportionality, suppresses disagreement, converts social problems into enemy images, and weakens deliberative ethics. The article proposes a conceptual triad - moral framing, populist boundary-making, and algorithmic amplification - as a tool for analyzing digital da'wah in contemporary Indonesia.

Keywords— populist Islam; digital da'wah; Islamic political communication; virality; moral panic; religious moderation; Indonesia.

Ethical Statement: It is declared that scientific and ethical principles were adhered to during the preparation of this work, and all sources used have been properly cited in the bibliography. The article has been reviewed by at least two peer reviewers, a similarity report was obtained using Turnitin, and compliance with research/publication ethics has been confirmed.

Conflicts of Interest: : The author(s) has no conflict of interest to declare.

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Article Type: Research Article

1. Introduction

The rapid expansion of internet access in Indonesia has transformed the communicative ecology of Islamic preaching. APJII reported that Indonesia had 221,563,479 internet users in 2024 with an internet penetration rate of 79.5%, while DataReportal recorded 143 million social media user identities in Indonesia in January 2025 (APJII, 2024; DataReportal, 2025). These figures matter not merely as indicators of technological adoption but as signs that religious discourse now circulates through infrastructures governed by attention, recommendation systems, short-form video culture, and emotionally reactive publics (Campbell & Tsuria, 2021). Within this ecology, this article offers a novel contribution by integrating Western communication theories on populism, framing, and affective publics with classical Islamic ethical concepts such as *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar*, *hisbah*, *maslahah*, and *adab al-ikhtilaf*. This theoretical synthesis is distinct from previous studies that have largely treated digital da'wah as either a religious or a political phenomenon, rather than examining the communicative structures through which religious language becomes politically populist under conditions of virality. By bridging these two intellectual traditions, the article provides a new analytical lens for distinguishing legitimate Islamic moral criticism from populist polarization in the Indonesian digital public sphere.

Within this ecology, da'wah increasingly appears in brief, visual, affective, and easily shareable formats. A sermon, legal reminder, moral warning, or political criticism may be reduced into a short clip, caption, meme, live-stream fragment, or repostable quotation. This format enables religious messages to reach audiences beyond formal mosques, pesantren, Islamic organizations, and classroom-based religious education, yet it also exposes da'wah to the logic of platforms that privilege speed, engagement, controversy, and recognizability (Hjarvard, 2011; Nisa, 2018; Tabaika et al., 2025).

One recurrent pattern in viral da'wah is the narrative of resistance against evil. This narrative can include calls to oppose corruption, injustice, moral decadence, religious insult, secularization, liberalism, immorality, social oppression, or threats to Muslim identity. In Islamic moral vocabulary, resistance to evil may be connected to *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar*, advice to rulers, social accountability, and the defense of public welfare, but

in digital political communication the same language can also be reorganized into emotionally simplified conflict between 'the righteous people' and 'the corrupt enemy' (Al-Ghazali, n.d.; Ibn Taymiyyah, n.d.; Hadiz, 2018; Mudde, 2004).

The concept of populist Islam used in this article is analytical rather than accusatory. It does not label every public expression of piety, conservative moral claim, or religious criticism as populist. Following scholarship on populism and Islamic politics, the term refers to a style of religious-political articulation that constructs the ummah as a morally authentic subject while identifying elites, outsiders, secular forces, deviant groups, or immoral actors as sources of betrayal and contamination (Hadiz, 2016; Laclau, 2005; Müller, 2016).

The Indonesian context makes this question especially important because Islamic communication has long been intertwined with democracy, civil society, religious moderation, identity politics, and electoral mobilization. Digital media does not create these tensions from nothing; it accelerates, fragments, and reconfigures them. Studies of Indonesian digital religious authority show that online da'wah can democratize religious access, but it can also produce popularity-based authority, instant religious judgments, commodified piety, and fragmented audiences (Mahendra et al., 2025; Rachman et al., 2025; La Harisi et al., 2026).

The central problem of this article is therefore conceptual: how can scholars distinguish digital da'wah that legitimately criticizes social evil from digital da'wah that turns moral criticism into populist political communication? This distinction is necessary because Islamic ethics requires courage in confronting wrongdoing, yet also demands justice, wisdom, truthfulness, proportionality, and protection from fitnah, slander, and unjust polarization (Al-Shatibi, n.d.; Al-Qaradawi, 1996; Kementerian Agama RI, 2019).

The purpose of this article is to offer a conceptual review of populist Islam and narratives of resistance against evil in viral digital da'wah as a form of Islamic political communication in Indonesia. Its contribution is a framework that links three analytical dimensions: moral framing, populist boundary-making, and algorithmic amplification. This framework enables researchers to analyze how Islamic moral language moves from ethical exhortation into political mobilization without reducing all da'wah to propaganda or all

religious criticism to polarization (Entman, 1993; Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Papacharissi, 2015).

2. Method

This article applies a critical conceptual review. The method is appropriate because the object of inquiry is not the measurable effect of a specific viral video on a specific audience but the formation of an analytical framework for understanding how narratives of evil, viral circulation, and Islamic identity operate within digital political communication. Conceptual review is useful when a study seeks to clarify categories, integrate theories, and identify normative boundaries rather than test causal hypotheses (Gilson & Goldberg, 2015; Jaakkola, 2020).

The sources synthesized in this review include international literature on populism, framing, moral panic, affective publics, digital religion, and political communication, as well as Indonesian and Indonesia-focused literature on digital da'wah, religious authority, Islamic organizations, religious moderation, and Islamic populism. The review also incorporates classical and modern Islamic ethical-political concepts, especially *amr ma'ruf nahi munkar*, *hisbah*, *maslahah*, *fiqh al-awlawiyyat*, and *adab al-ikhtilaf*, because the topic cannot be responsibly examined only through secular communication theory (Al-Ghazali, n.d.; Ibn Taymiyyah, n.d.; Al-Shatibi, n.d.; Al-Alwani, 1993).

The analysis proceeds through four steps. First, the article defines populist Islam and viral digital da'wah as overlapping but non-identical phenomena. Second, it reads resistance against evil through framing theory and moral panic theory. Third, it compares Islamic ethical concepts with modern theories of populist communication and affective publics. Fourth, it formulates a conceptual model for evaluating whether a viral da'wah message functions primarily as ethical reminder, social criticism, or populist political mobilization (Cohen, 1972; Entman, 1993; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Moffitt, 2016).

The limitations of the article must be emphasized. It does not conduct netnography, sentiment analysis, or content coding of particular preachers, platforms, or organizations. It also does not claim that conservative da'wah, Islamic activism, or criticism of immoral behavior is identical with extremism. Its focus is the communicative structure through

which religious language can become politically populist under conditions of virality and algorithmic amplification (Lim, 2017; Tabaiika et al., 2025; La Harisi et al., 2026).

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Populist Islam as a Moral-Political Style

Populist Islam is best understood not as a fixed theological doctrine but as a style of political articulation that uses Islamic identity to organize social grievances, moral boundaries, and claims of representation. Hadiz argues that Islamic populism in Indonesia and the Middle East mobilizes the category of the ummah across class and social divisions, often by presenting Muslims as a morally injured collective confronting corrupt elites and unjust structures. This approach helps explain why the language of religious grievance can be politically powerful even when it is not expressed through formal Islamic parties (Hadiz, 2016, 2018).

This understanding resonates with broader populism theory. Mudde defines populism as a thin-centered ideology that divides society into 'the pure people' and 'the corrupt elite,' whereas Laclau treats populism as a way of constructing the political through chains of equivalence among heterogeneous demands. Although these theories emerged from different contexts, both are useful for analyzing digital da'wah when religious messages convert multiple grievances into a single moral opposition between the ummah and evil (Laclau, 2005; Mudde, 2004).

In Indonesian Islamic communication, such articulation can appear in soft and hard forms. In a soft form, it may express moral concern, solidarity with the oppressed, and criticism of corruption or injustice. In a hard form, it may narrow the category of authentic Muslims, delegitimize disagreement, and construct out-groups as enemies of religion. The difference lies not in whether a message is religiously conservative or politically critical, but in whether it pluralizes moral reasoning or collapses it into antagonistic identity boundaries (Müller, 2016; Moffitt, 2016; Kementerian Agama RI, 2019).

3.2 Narratives of Resistance against Evil in Islamic Communication

Resistance against evil has a legitimate place in Islamic moral communication. The tradition of amar ma'ruf nahi munkar affirms that believers have responsibility to encourage

what is right and prevent what is wrong, while the concept of hisbah historically concerns public accountability and protection of social order. Al-Ghazali discussed the ethical conditions of commanding right and forbidding wrong, including knowledge, gentleness, and avoidance of greater harm; Ibn Taymiyyah also framed hisbah as a public responsibility oriented toward justice and welfare rather than reckless hostility (Al-Ghazali, n.d.; Ibn Taymiyyah, n.d.).

However, Islamic ethics does not allow every expression of anger to be treated as moral courage. The maqasid-oriented tradition requires that religious action consider consequences, priorities, and public benefit. Al-Shatibi's concept of *maslahah* and al-Qaradawi's *fiqh al-awlawiyyat* remind Muslim communicators that the prevention of evil must be measured by wisdom, proportionality, and the hierarchy of benefits and harms. In digital da'wah, these principles are crucial because a message intended as moral warning can quickly become mass suspicion, humiliation, or collective hostility (Al-Shatibi, n.d.; Al-Qaradawi, 1996).

The concept of *adab al-ikhtilaf* further complicates simplistic resistance narratives. Islamic disagreement is not merely the presence of opposing opinions; it requires ethical discipline, recognition of scholarly plurality, humility before complexity, and refusal to demonize opponents. When viral da'wah turns disagreement into evidence of betrayal or disbelief, it departs from this ethic and moves toward populist boundary-making, even if it uses familiar Islamic vocabulary (Al-Alwani, 1993; Kementerian Agama RI, 2019).

3.3 Viral Da'wah and the Platform Logic of Simplification

Digital da'wah operates within platforms that select, rank, and circulate content according to engagement signals. This condition transforms religious communication because visibility is not determined only by scholarly credibility, institutional authority, or theological depth, but also by algorithmic recommendation, emotional intensity, aesthetic presentation, and audience interaction. Indonesian studies of digital da'wah increasingly show that authority is being reconstructed through the intersection of scholarship, communicative style, branding, and platform performance (Rachman et al., 2025; Tabaika et al., 2025; La Harisi et al., 2026).

Viral formats favor compression. Complex fiqh debates, historical grievances, theological distinctions, and political conflicts are often simplified into short claims that can be understood within seconds. This does not mean that short-form da'wah is necessarily shallow; concise reminders can be effective and beneficial. The risk emerges when compression eliminates qualifications, evidentiary standards, and ethical safeguards, so that the message becomes emotionally satisfying but intellectually fragile (Nisa, 2018; Alfi, 2025; Tabaika et al., 2025).

The logic of virality also privileges affect. Papacharissi's concept of affective publics helps explain how networked audiences form around emotional expressions rather than formal membership alone. In viral da'wah, anger at evil, fear of moral decline, pride in Islamic identity, and sympathy for victims can create fast-moving publics. These publics may support solidarity and moral reform, but they may also intensify outrage cycles and reduce interpretive patience (Papacharissi, 2015; Bennett & Segerberg, 2012).

3.4 Framing Evil: From Moral Reminder to Political Mobilization

Framing theory explains how communicators define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and propose remedies. A viral da'wah message becomes politically significant when it frames evil not simply as a sin to be avoided or an injustice to be corrected, but as the defining marker of collective conflict. The frame may identify a villain, name a victimized ummah, call for resistance, and provide a simple moral map of the social world (Entman, 1993; Snow & Benford, 1988).

This framing can be constructive when it clarifies injustice, mobilizes ethical responsibility, and invites lawful civic action. Islamic political communication has the right to criticize corruption, oppression, exploitation, blasphemy, environmental destruction, pornography, and other harms. Yet it becomes populist when the frame transforms complex social problems into a moral battlefield in which only one group represents truth and all dissenters are treated as collaborators with evil (Hadiz, 2018; Müller, 2016).

Moral panic theory helps identify another risk. Cohen's classic concept of folk devils describes how media narratives can exaggerate threats, create symbolic enemies, and produce disproportionate reactions. In digital da'wah, a perceived moral threat may be amplified through repeated clips, dramatic captions, selective evidence, and emotional

commentary until it appears more totalizing than it is. This process may strengthen group identity, but it can also weaken reasoned judgment and social trust (Cohen, 1972; Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2009; Lim, 2017).

3.5 Populist Boundary-Making in Islamic Political Communication

Populist boundary-making occurs when communication draws a moral line between the authentic people and those depicted as corrupt, alien, deviant, or threatening. In Islamic populist rhetoric, this line may be drawn between the ummah and immoral elites, religious believers and secular liberals, ordinary Muslims and compromised institutions, or defenders of faith and enemies of Islam. Such boundaries are politically powerful because they provide clarity, belonging, and moral certainty (Mudde, 2004; Laclau, 2005; Hadiz, 2016).

In digital da'wah, boundary-making is intensified by comment sections, hashtags, duets, stitches, reposts, and algorithmic clustering. Audiences do not merely receive messages; they add accusations, testimonies, jokes, insults, prayers, and calls to action. This participatory layer can expand da'wah into a networked moral campaign in which the original preacher no longer fully controls the meaning or consequences of the message (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Tabaika et al., 2025; La Harisi et al., 2026).

The danger is not that Muslims form collective identity, because communal identity is a normal and important part of religious life. The danger is anti-plural moral monopoly, in which one communicative camp claims exclusive representation of true Islam and treats all internal criticism as betrayal. Religious moderation in Indonesia is relevant here because it does not demand the privatization of religion; rather, it encourages justice, balance, tolerance, national commitment, and non-violence in the public expression of religious conviction (Kementerian Agama RI, 2019; Mahendra et al., 2025).

3.6 Algorithmic Amplification and Popularity-Based Authority

Algorithmic amplification changes the structure of religious authority. Traditional authority in Islam is often built through learning, sanad, institutional trust, recognized scholarship, and moral character. Digital authority may still include these elements, but it is increasingly mediated by follower counts, engagement rates, cinematic editing, influencer charisma, and platform familiarity. Recent Indonesian studies describe this as a

shift from hierarchy-based authority toward hybrid or popularity-based authority (Rachman et al., 2025; La Harisi et al., 2026).

This shift does not mean that online preachers are necessarily unqualified or that traditional scholars cannot be effective online. Rather, it means that platform visibility can detach public religious influence from scholarly verification. A clip may circulate because it is emotionally compelling, not because it is theologically careful. This creates an authority paradox: audiences may claim to value knowledge and credibility, while the content they repeatedly encounter is shaped by algorithmic visibility and affective resonance (Tabaika et al., 2025; La Harisi et al., 2026).

For Islamic political communication, the authority paradox is especially consequential. When a message about evil, corruption, or religious threat is amplified by popularity rather than deliberative verification, it can shape public perceptions before scholarly, journalistic, or institutional clarification occurs. In a polarized environment, correction may arrive too late because the viral frame has already provided audiences with emotional certainty and group identity (Chadwick, 2017; Papacharissi, 2015; Lim, 2017).

3.7 A Conceptual Model: Moral Framing, Populist Boundary-Making, and Algorithmic Amplification

The first element of the proposed model is moral framing. Researchers should ask how a da'wah message defines evil, identifies victims and perpetrators, selects evidence, and proposes action. A message remains ethically constructive when it preserves complexity, acknowledges uncertainty, and directs audiences toward proportionate reform. It becomes politically populist when it simplifies evil into a total enemy and frames resistance as loyalty to the authentic ummah (Entman, 1993; Al-Shatibi, n.d.; Hadiz, 2018).

The second element is populist boundary-making. Researchers should examine whether the message constructs a moral binary between pure believers and corrupt enemies, whether it delegitimizes internal disagreement, and whether it claims exclusive representation of Islamic authenticity. This element is not measured by the presence of strong moral language alone; it is measured by the structure of exclusion and the refusal of legitimate plurality (Mudde, 2004; Müller, 2016; Al-Alwani, 1993).

The third element is algorithmic amplification. Researchers should analyze how the message circulates through short-form videos, hashtags, comments, shares, influencer

networks, and recommendation systems. A message may begin as a local moral reminder but become a political event when platform circulation turns it into a collective symbol of grievance. This element directs attention to the infrastructure of visibility rather than only to the intention of the preacher (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Papacharissi, 2015; La Harisi et al., 2026).

Together, these three elements make it possible to distinguish at least three communicative forms. The first is ethical da'wah, which invites moral improvement while maintaining knowledge, wisdom, and proportionality. The second is civic Islamic criticism, which challenges public wrongdoing while remaining open to evidence, law, and plural reasoning. The third is populist Islamic mobilization, which turns moral criticism into an antagonistic identity struggle intensified by platform virality (Al-Ghazali, n.d.; Kementerian Agama RI, 2019; Hadiz, 2016).

3.8 Implications for Indonesian Islamic Communication

The framework has implications for scholars of Islamic communication. It suggests that digital da'wah should not be studied only as religious education or media strategy, but also as political communication when it organizes grievance, identity, and collective action. This does not require researchers to reduce religion to politics; rather, it recognizes that religious messages can move across ethical, educational, cultural, and political registers within the same platform environment (Mahendra et al., 2025; Campbell & Tsuria, 2021).

The framework also has implications for preachers and Islamic institutions. Digital da'wah requires not only attractive content but also ethical safeguards: verification before accusation, proportionate language, contextual explanation, distinction between sin and sinner, avoidance of takfir-like insinuations, and openness to correction. These safeguards are not concessions to secularism; they are rooted in Islamic communication ethics and the maqasid-oriented concern for preventing greater harm (Al-Ghazali, n.d.; Al-Shatibi, n.d.; Al-Qaradawi, 1996).

For educators and policymakers, the discussion points to the importance of critical digital religious literacy. Muslim audiences need tools to ask who is speaking, what evidence is used, what emotions are being activated, what enemies are being constructed, and what action is being demanded. Such literacy is consistent with Indonesia's religious

moderation agenda because it protects the public role of religion while resisting misinformation, dehumanization, and violent polarization (Kementerian Agama RI, 2019; Rachman et al., 2025; La Harisi et al., 2026).

While this article has primarily focused on the risks of populist mobilization in viral da'wah, it is equally important to acknowledge that digital platforms also host significant counter-narratives and moderate forms of Islamic communication. These alternative voices do not merely reject populist framing but actively demonstrate alternative modes of engagement that are both religiously grounded and publicly constructive. The Indonesian landscape includes prominent figures and institutions that model ethical da'wah by emphasizing patience (*sabr*), scholarly disagreement (*adab al-ikhtilaf*), public benefit (*maslahah*), and proportionality (*i'tidal*). For example, traditional *ulama* from NU and Muhammadiyah often use social media to contextualize moral teachings within Indonesia's pluralistic society, avoiding the simplification of complex social problems into enemy images. Some celebrity preachers and youth communities, such as those affiliated with *Hijrah* movements emphasizing spiritual self-improvement, focus on personal piety rather than political mobilization.

These counter-narratives use platform features such as live Q&A sessions, longer-form explanatory videos, and collaborative content with scholars from different backgrounds to demonstrate how deliberation and humility can coexist with moral commitment. However, these moderate forms often face an asymmetrical visibility challenge: algorithmic systems tend to reward the emotional intensity and conflict-driven engagement of populist content, making it harder for nuanced, deliberative forms to achieve viral reach. This structural bias means that the presence of counter-narratives should not be interpreted as the problem being automatically resolved, nor should it lead to complacency about the broader media environment. Rather, recognizing these alternative practices highlights the need for strategies to strengthen and amplify moderate voices, improve digital religious literacy among audiences, and develop platform features that better support deliberative engagement over outrage-driven virality. Future research should systematically compare the content, circulation patterns, and audience reception of populist and moderate da'wah forms to understand how platform environments shape which version of Islamic communication becomes publicly visible and influential.

4. Conclusion

This article has argued that narratives of resistance against evil in viral digital da'wah should be analysed through the intersection of Islamic ethics, populist communication, and platform logic. Resistance to evil is a legitimate and necessary part of Islamic moral life, but in digital environments it can be reorganized into populist political communication when it constructs the ummah as a pure collective, identifies simplified enemies, and circulates through emotionally rewarding algorithmic systems. The article proposes a conceptual triad of moral framing, populist boundary-making, and algorithmic amplification. This triad helps distinguish ethical da'wah from civic Islamic criticism and from populist Islamic mobilization. Its value lies in avoiding two extremes: the stigmatization of public Islam as inherently polarizing and the romanticization of viral da'wah as automatically beneficial because it uses religious vocabulary.

Future research should apply this framework to empirical studies of specific platforms, hashtags, sermon clips, audience comments, and influencer networks. Comparative work could examine how the same moral issue is framed differently by traditional ulama, Islamic organizations, celebrity preachers, youth communities, and algorithmically successful short-form content creators. Such research would deepen understanding of how Islamic political communication in Indonesia is shaped by both ethical tradition and digital infrastructure.

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