



Right-Wing Populism and Vigilante Violence in Asia

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Accepted: 5 May 2021

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Abstract

Right-wing populism is threatening pluralist underpinnings of diverse democracies around the world by staking claims of privilege for dominant ethnic groups and undermining minority rights. Existing scholarship has evaluated these threats in terms of the majoritarian vision peddled by charismatic politicians seeking electoral victory and the enactment of discriminatory policies through the dismantling of institutional constraints by those already in power. This article looks beyond these macro consequences of right-wing populism and examines vigilante violence as the mechanism through which these movements articulate and enforce their vision at the grassroots level. It compares the experience of India and Indonesia to evaluate factors that have enabled right-wing populists to deploy vigilantism for dismantling democratic protections against majoritarianism. I argue that the intrinsic properties of vigilantism as an efficient and transformative form of violence make it a valuable tool for right-wing populists. However, its use for political ends in two of the world's largest democracies is enabled by three factors. First, because pluralist constitutions make it difficult to curtail minority rights through top-down legislation in India and Indonesia, vigilantism has become an appealing extra-legal strategy for undermining these rights from the bottom up. Second, widespread social legitimacy associated with everyday forms of vigilantism allows right-wing populists to scale up local templates of violence for national goals. Third, similar pathologies of state-building in both countries enable right-wing vigilantes to act with impunity. I conclude by arguing that while vigilantism has long been thought of as a way in which disempowered citizens cope with dissatisfactory provision of order by the state, right-wing populists are transforming vigilante violence into means for engineering social dominance.

Right-wing populists are undermining pluralist underpinnings of diverse democracies around the world by mobilizing masses with claims of privilege for dominant ethnic groups at the expense of minority rights. In some cases, their grievances are

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rooted in foundational moments of the polity that denied ethnic majorities their “due” status by according equal rights to all groups. In others, claims of majority marginalization stem from perceived alliances between political elites and “disloyal” minorities, accused of exploiting ordinary people for their own gain. Ethnic grievances are to be expected in any diverse society. However, the adoption of populism as a political strategy for correcting perceived deficiencies of ethnic representation threatens those features of democracy that are essential for curbing its citizens’ worst majoritarian impulses (Lukacs 2005; Levitsky and Loxton 2012; Rummens 2018).

Existing scholarship analyzes two ways in which right-wing populism weakens democracy. First, it undermines the behavioral foundations of democracy that require compromise. Right-wing populists define the “authentic people” as a homogenous ethnic majority, while denouncing minority groups or immigrants as exploitative traitors. Propagation of this discourse can polarize both the electorate and its representatives along rigid identity lines, making it difficult to find common ground on the basis of other, cross-cutting preferences (Lukacs 2005; Carothers and O’Donohue 2019). Second, right-wing populism erodes institutional safeguards against majoritarianism. Drawing on their electoral mandate, populist leaders can dismantle mechanisms of horizontal accountability that constrain the unbridled exercise of executive power, such as constitutional protections for minorities, judicial oversight against their arbitrary suspension, and parliamentary thresholds to prevent their expedient amendment (Slater 2013; Galston 2018).

While the macro effects of right-wing populism are highly visible in electoral and legislative politics, relatively less is known about the way in which these movements pursue social change. How do these movements transform everyday lives of the “people” whose sovereignty they claim to embody? How do ordinary followers of populist leaders interpret their vision of an ideal society? What measures do they take to enforce it within their own communities? What determines their choice of strategy and what are the factors that enable them?

The experience of Asia’s two largest democracies illustrates these gaps in knowledge. Initially founded on secular ideas of the nation, India and Indonesia have witnessed the spectacular rise of right-wing populism over the past decade. While Hindu nationalists had long advocated for a majoritarian state in India, their ideology was transformed into a populist movement by Narendra Modi’s rapid ascent to power in 2014. Modi used his personal charisma and humble origins to mobilize mass support for the *Bhartiya Janata Party* (BJP). Hailing them as the “real Indians,” he vowed to restore the country’s Hindu majority to their rightful place after “twelve hundred years of slavery” to foreign Muslim rulers (Varshney 2019b, 337–38). Since then, the success of the BJP in national and regional elections has resulted in the unprecedented use of state power to institutionalize Hindu dominance and the systematic marginalization of India’s religious minorities (Chatterji et al. 2019).

Right-wing populists in Indonesia have had less electoral success, but their struggle to assert Islam’s demographic advantage for a majoritarian state has been just as intense (Hadiz 2016). Demands for recognizing Islam as the state ideology were repressed during three decades of authoritarian rule under Suharto’s New Order regime (1966–1998). After democratization in 1998, right-wing Islamist parties remained marginal players in national politics as they lacked a

coherent agenda. Things changed dramatically in 2016, when a charismatic group of preachers used a high-profile blasphemy case to mobilize millions of Muslims with a single-minded call to “defend” Islam from being desecrated within their own homeland (Mietzner 2018). This broad coalition of right-wing populists narrowly lost the 2019 presidential election, sparing Indonesia the kind of discriminatory policies enacted in India under the BJP (Slater and Tudor 2019). Nevertheless, it produced a dangerous polarization of Indonesian society along nationalist and religious lines that will define the terms of political contestation for years to come (Warburton 2020).

Despite varying success in achieving *political* hegemony through electoral and legislative change, right-wing populists in both countries have used vigilantism as a strategy for establishing *social* dominance of the religious majority they claim to represent. In India, affiliates of the Hindu nationalist consortium Sangh Parivar have terrorized religious minorities with brutal “cow lynchings” and violent mob attacks to punish inter-religious marriage or religious conversion (Andersen and Damle 2019). Vigilante squads from Indonesia’s most influential populist organization, The Islamic Defender’s Front (FPI), have attacked alleged blasphemers, minority houses of worship, and “deviant” religious sects (Wilson 2014). Over time, these right-wing groups have expanded the scope of their activities to violently punish a broad range of “un-Islamic” behavior such as sale of alcohol, fornication, and homosexuality.

This article asks why right-wing populists in India and Indonesia are using vigilantism for articulating and enforcing their majoritarian demands at the grassroots level, and what are the factors that enable them to do so. It argues that although vigilantism is smaller in scale compared to riots and pogroms, it is a highly efficient and transformative form of violence that complements populism’s emphasis on the direct exercise of popular sovereignty by defying institutional and legal constraints. These properties make vigilantism a useful strategy for populists, who seek to dismantle democratic protections against majoritarian dominance from the bottom up. However, the strategic value of vigilantism does not necessarily enable its use.

Drawing on comparative analysis of India and Indonesia, the article identifies three factors that have enabled the use of vigilantism by right-wing populists. First, constitutions based on broad social consensus make it difficult for right-wing populists to undo the pluralist underpinnings of democracy through electoral victory and legislative change. Vigilantism thus emerges as an appealing out-of-system strategy for reconstituting everyday notions of right and wrong in society, paving the way for legislation that can formally align the law with a narrow, majoritarian idea of the nation. Second, quotidian forms of vigilantism are also prevalent across parts of India and Indonesia that routinely punish theft, sorcery, and sexual indiscretion. The social legitimacy associated with everyday vigilantism makes it possible for right-wing populists and their affiliates to scale up these local templates of collective violence for national causes. Third, similar pathologies of state-building in both countries have enabled right-wing populists to collude with state officials in order to protect themselves from the consequences of engaging in extra-legal violence. The ability to act with impunity not only emboldens vigilantes to respond to perceived religious offenses with violence but also reinforces the terror experienced by their victims and coerces compliance with right-wing demands.

The article is organized into five sections. “[The Rise of Right-Wing Populism in India and Indonesia](#)” compares the political trajectory of right-wing populism across India and Indonesia. “[A Concurrent Surge in Vigilantism](#)” describes the concurrent rise of vigilantism in the two cases. “[What Makes Vigilantism Useful for Populists?](#)” examines the properties of vigilantism that make it a useful strategy for grassroots enforcement of right-wing populists’ demands. “[What Is Enabling Vigilantism by Right-Wing Populists?](#)” identifies the factors that are facilitating the deployment of vigilantism by right-wing populists in India and Indonesia. “[Conclusion](#)” concludes by noting the broader significance of studying vigilantism as a populist strategy for bringing about rapid social change.

The Rise of Right-Wing Populism in India and Indonesia

Right-wing populist movements in India and Indonesia are rooted in the early rejection of majority religion as the basis for state organization in favor of secularism. There are, however, important ideological differences. Proponents of Hindutva ideology are primarily concerned with establishing dominance over non-Hindu minorities, especially Muslims who have long been classified as traitors to the nation. In Indonesia, Islamists are battling not just for inter-ethnic dominance over non-Muslim minorities but also for intra-ethnic hegemony over moderate Muslim organizations that have fared well in the secular state. Furthermore, while the transformation of these ideological projects into right-wing populism bears much similarity, historical factors have produced different electoral outcomes for them.

Comparable but Distinct Ideological Projects

India and Indonesia are similar in that the experience of a prolonged popular struggle against colonial rule, led by charismatic populist leaders, gave rise to an inclusive nationalism that became the basis for organizing political power after independence (Tudor and Slater 2016). This meant that religious groups that constitute more than 80% of the population, Hindus in India, and Muslims in Indonesia, had to eschew the prospect of political domination and agree to a secular constitution that guarantees equal rights and protections to all citizens, regardless of their ascriptive identities or beliefs. However, the enactment and enforcement of this inclusive vision have been rife with contention and conflict in both countries.

Majoritarian demands in India were born out of post-independence debates over the role of religion in the state but suffered decades of political marginalization. The leadership of the Muslim League did not believe that the Hindu majority in India could curb its impulse for domination, despite offers of institutional guarantees from the Congress Party (Jalal 1994). As a result, the Indian sub-continent was divided into two countries with distinct ideas of nationhood: India sought to enshrine secular principles into its constitution, and Pakistan unabashedly embraced religious majoritarianism as its national creed. In independent India, Hindu nationalist groups continued to demand that the country’s newly established laws duly reflect their

majority status as the Muslims had done in Pakistan. Under the hegemony of the Congress Party, these demands were soundly defeated in the early constitutional debates and, for a long time, were relegated to the margins of politics (Jaffrelot 2007). In the long term, however, Hindu nationalism proved resilient and now dominates the mainstream political discourse.

The early constitutional debates in Indonesia followed a similar pattern. Having played a crucial role in the armed struggle against Dutch colonial rule, representatives of various Islamic organizations demanded that Sharia law serves as the basis for Indonesia's national ideology. A provision obligating Muslim citizens to follow Islamic law was added to an initial draft of the country's first constitution in 1945. However, fearing that the exclusive mention of Islam would be viewed as the first step towards majoritarianism, nationalist leaders dropped the clause to assuage the fears of Christian, Hindu, and Buddhist minorities (Lev 1966). Instead of focusing on Islam as the majority religion, Indonesia thus adopted the synchronistic state ideology of *Pancasila* that mandates citizens' belief in a single God. Following the removal of the Sharia provision that came to be known as the Jakarta Charter, demands for its reinsertion became tantamount to treason under the authoritarian New Order regime (1966–1998). Today, however, this issue has become the rallying point for Islamists, who are campaigning to return to a constitution that adopted Islam as its basis.

Even though majoritarian demands were initially marginalized in India and Indonesia, recurrent episodes of communal conflict kept them alive. The partition of British India in 1947 led to one of the worst instances of mass violence in history, as more than one million people are believed to have died and tens of millions were displaced during religious riots. In independent India, Hindu-Muslim riots have remained an enduring feature of politics in some states that have a sizable Muslim population (Brass 1996; Varshney 2002; Wilkinson 2006). Apart from horizontal conflict, religion is also at the heart of a protracted insurgency in Kashmir, which has been used by Hindu nationalists to legitimize their claims about Muslims' disloyalty to India (Varshney 1991).

Indonesia has experienced its own share of religious conflict. Militant Islamists, who rejected the secular constitution, unsuccessfully fought a civil war to establish an Islamic state during the first two decades of Indonesia's independence (van Dijk 2014). Under the New Order (1966–1998), activities of Islamic groups were heavily regulated. Instead, Suharto privileged ethnic Chinese and Christian minorities as a political counterweight to Muslim groups, whose potential for mass mobilization posed a threat to regime stability. These discriminatory policies bred resentment among Muslims. After the democratic transition in 1998, the collapse of the New Order and introduction of competitive local elections resulted in widespread Christian-Muslim rioting as the two groups competed for local power (Bertrand 2004; Sidel 2006; Klinken 2007; Varshney, Tadjoddin, and Panggabean 2008; Tajima 2013). These communal conflicts also served as a rallying point for then-nascent Islamic terrorist groups that have since grown into a formidable security threat (Jones 2011).

The parallel trajectories of Hindu and Islamist nationalism in India and Indonesia have produced comparable but distinct ideological projects. The two ideologies

are similar in their xenophobic impulse towards religious minorities that they view as “traitors” and are built on the idea of an imminent threat from a historical enemy to the authentic “people.” In India, the most preeminent threat to the idea of a Hindu state is posed by its Muslim minority, but earlier, Christians were also accused of undermining Hindu dominance by proselytizing. Hindu nationalists have long accused Muslims of treachery for splitting the country on the basis of religion. Around this discourse of loyalty, Indian Muslims are also accused of plotting to retake control of India by out-populating the Hindu majority through large families and conversion of Hindu women to Islam by marriage.

According to Islamists in Indonesia, the main public enemies are the ethnic Chinese, whose loyalty has been subject to suspicion throughout the nation’s history (Purdey 2006; Sensenig 2008). In the early years of independence, the ethnic Chinese were first resented as colonial collaborators under Dutch rule and then denounced as treacherous communists during the anti-communist purge in 1965 (Robinson 2018). Under the New Order (1966–1998), even as ordinary citizens of Chinese descent were prohibited from displaying their cultural symbols and language, wealthy Chinese Tycoons were showered with economic concessions and business opportunities. After democratization, the privileged economic and political position of a select group of individuals has been used by right-wing populists to propagate an image of the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia as disloyal and exploitative people, who are stealing the nation’s resources for their own profit. To a lesser extent, Islamists also view Indonesia’s Christian minority as posing a demographic threat in areas where Muslims have a slim majority.

While similar in their classification of “external” threats from minorities, Hindu nationalists in India and Islamists in Indonesia differ significantly in how they treat internal divisions among co-religionists. In India, the popularization of Hindutva ideology has entailed consolidation of deep-seated class and caste-based divisions among Hindus in an attempt to build a united front against minorities. As several prominent scholars have noted, Hinduism has historically existed in India less as a “religion” and more as an amalgamation of loosely connected sects and practices (Chatterji et al. 2019). After the 1990s, Hindu nationalists in India made a concerted effort to broaden the ideological platform of Hindutva and make appeals to lower-caste Hindus, who had hitherto been excluded from what was essentially an elite movement (Hansen 1999; Jaffrelot 2017).

In contrast to Hindutva’s consolidatory approach in India, Indonesian Islamists have had to battle a rival Muslim narrative about the place of Islam in the nation. The well-established presence of large, moderate Muslim mass organizations, Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), has presented Islamists with a significant barrier to garnering public support for their key demands about the adoption of Sharia law for Muslims (Hefner 2000). Many members of these moderate organizations share Islamists’ views on privileged position for Muslims in Indonesia, the threat of non-Muslim proselytization, and the need to ban “deviant” sects within Islam (Menchik 2019). However, both Muhammadiyah and NU have rejected repeated proposals to recognize Islam as the basis for state ideology. Such a move would not only trigger conflict with non-Muslim minorities but also create contention among Muslims about which doctrine of Islam should be favored by the state.

NU and Muhammadiyah have actively marginalized Islamist demands by exercising their considerable logistical advantage garnered through access to state resources (Bush 2009) and by articulating coherent ideological alternatives that acknowledge Islam's dominant place in a diverse nation, without delegating its uniform enforcement to the state (Fealy et al. 2008). Faced with these obstacles, Islamists in Indonesia have had to define themselves in distinction and often in opposition to moderate Muslim groups, who preach a pluralist vision of Islam.

Similar Paths to Populism but Divergent Electoral Outcomes

The right-wing populist movements that are ascendant in India and Indonesia today have resurrected ideas of religious nationalists that were long relegated to the margins of political discourse. Ironically, it is the configuration of the secular state that has made the voters' religious identity an integral part of electoral politics. By acknowledging all religions equally, the state in India and Indonesia assumed responsibility for producing and enforcing legislation that caters to the needs of different religious groups and adjudicates conflicts between them (Hansen 1999; Menchik 2016). Most notably, in this regard, both countries have retained blasphemy laws inherited from colonial governments as well as the civil codes that regulate religious offense, marriage, inheritance, and divorce. Other issues include regulation of inter-religious marriage and restrictions on building houses of worship. The state's involvement in governance of the religious domain also means that religion remains a salient feature of electoral politics. This is why even politicians from secular parties in both India and Indonesia actively mobilize majority and minority religious voting blocs with promises of policy concessions and religious regulations (Buehler 2016; Jaffrelot 2017).

Despite their claims about speaking on behalf of the disgruntled masses, scholars have noted the elitist nature of BJP's policies (Thachil 2016) and the oligarchic backers of Islamists in Indonesia (Hadiz 2016). Given these credentials, can religious nationalist movements in India and Indonesia be classified as populist?

When we think of populism as a set of political strategies, we can identify three features of contemporary Hindu nationalists and Islamist movements that are usually associated with right-wing populists. First, like all right-wing populists, Hindu nationalists in India and Islamists in Indonesia have made majoritarian demands by defining themselves as the "authentic" people, under threat by disloyal minorities. BJP politicians portray Hindus as the legitimate owners of their native land, who were first subjugated to the rule of Muslim invaders and then to the colonial rule of a Christian imperial power. Their current political demands revolve around "correcting" what they see as the Hindus' historically disadvantaged position despite their numbers. These include cutting the political "privileges" of religious minorities, especially Muslims, in terms of government funding and autonomy for educational institutions and personal laws, as well as regulating Muslims' social behavior that is considered offensive to Hindu sensibilities (Sharma 2011). In Indonesia, Islamist populists emphasize the extraordinary sacrifices made by Muslims in the war of independence to portray themselves as the most deserving citizens. This image is

then used not only to ask for greater resources for Muslims in terms of special government schemes and quotas in the civil service but also to demand exclusion of minority religions and sects from elected public office and of their religious symbols from public space (Jones 2015; Fealy 2016a; Menchik 2016).

Second, political elites in both countries are classified as an obstruction to the realization of the people's true destiny. While particular minorities are othered with accusations of disloyalty and deceit, right-wing populists attack the credibility of secular politicians from dominant parties by portraying them as collaborators. In India, the BJP has persistently accused the Congress Party of "appeasing" Muslims with unfair concessions in exchange for their votes. In Indonesia, Islamist politicians in recent campaigns have leveled explicit accusations against secular nationalist politicians of being a stooge of the "aseng" (a derogatory term for ethnic Chinese) and for harboring "secret sympathies" for non-Muslims.

Finally, these right-wing movements are built upon grassroots mobilization and mass organizations that galvanized a diverse set of groups into political action after a notable historical event. The BJP remained marginalized from mainstream politics for the first four decades of India's independence. Shunned from electoral politics, its leaders focused instead on building a network of grassroots volunteers, most notably the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) (Andersen and Damle 2019), whose members provided religious education and social services in their local areas (Thachil 2016). The BJP finally emerged on the scene as a viable political party once the hegemony of the Congress Party began to end. However, its vision of a resurrected Hindu state in India remained vague until 1992, when the demolition of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya proved to be a unifying rallying point for Hindu nationalist groups of different creeds and affiliations. The site of a medieval mosque, built by the Mughal Emperor Babar, had long been disputed as the birthplace of the Hindu deity, Ram.

The BJP managed to mobilize a plurality in the parliamentary elections in 1996 and again in 1998 to form its first government. Despite winning electoral power, however, the party's capacity for enforcing its majoritarian vision was constrained by a system of checks and balances and a coalition government. These constraints eased in BJP's second time in power in 2014 and especially after its re-election by a larger margin in 2019, under the leadership of Narendra Modi, who has successfully personalized right-wing Hindu politics in the country (Varshney 2019a). Modi's image of an effective administrator as the Chief Minister of Gujrat, his humble origins, and an ascetic lifestyle have been critical in popularizing the BJP's message and giving it the mandate it needed to enforce its political agenda that has been decades in the making (Varshney 2019b).

In Indonesia, demands for recognition of Islam as a part of the country's national ideology were resurrected after the democratic transition in 1998. During the process of constitutional amendments, Islamist parties mobilized to call for the re-insertion of the Jakarta Charter clause that obligates Muslims to follow Sharia law. Once again, the motion was defeated with overwhelming opposition from nationalist parties and moderate Muslim mass organizations (Horowitz 2013). Unable to push their cause through the parliament, an array of Islamist organizations in Indonesia have taken a more social approach towards building support for Islam's primacy in

politics. Most notably, this cause has been taken up by the Front Pembela Islam-FPI (Islamic defender's Front) and the Partai Keadilan Sejahtera (PKS). Despite sharing common goals, the two organizations have taken different routes to building grassroots social networks to bring about political and social change. The FPI is a mass organization that was first assembled by the military as a militia for countering pro-democracy protests in 1998. It has since built a dense network of youth volunteers in urban areas and gained notoriety for leading vigilante raids against broadly defined un-Islamic activities, as well as extortion of small businesses (Wilson 2015). In contrast, the PKS is a political party that has denounced violence and focused instead on developing a vast welfare network that helps maintain its 7% vote share in national elections (Hamayotsu 2011). Despite building solid bases of mass support, both the FPI and the PKS were marginal players in mainstream politics as their conservative agenda had little appeal to the broader public.

This changed rapidly in 2016 when Jakarta's Christian-Chinese governor was accused of blasphemy. The re-election bid of Basuki Cahaya Purnama (Ahok) was strongly opposed by the FPI, who claimed that Muslims are prohibited from choosing an "infidel" as their leader. This message fell on deaf ears, and public support for Ahok remained high, until a video surfaced, showing him denouncing Islamist groups for misquoting Qur'anic verses to "fool" people into voting against him. These remarks were labeled blasphemous by the FPI and its affiliates. The video was disseminated widely on social media. After filing a police complaint against Ahok on blasphemy charges, Islamist organizations drew on their grassroots volunteers to organize the largest public protest in Indonesia's history to demand his conviction. The framing of the protest, as a call to defend Islam, found unprecedented resonance in the broadest sections of Muslim society, including the PKS. Even members of NU and Muhammadiyah who have opposed the right-wing politics of FPI and PKS felt compelled to join the protests (Fealy 2016b). The "threat" from a non-Muslim Christian politician, insulting Muslims, was easy to imagine for many, given long-standing prejudices against religious minorities in general and the ethnic Chinese in particular (Sumaktoyo [undefined/ed](#)). Moreover, the incident appeared to give credibility to the long-standing claim by Islamist organizations that Muslims had been historically disadvantaged in their own home.

This mass agitation that became known as the "212 Movement," resulted in a spectacular victory for the Islamist organizations. The incumbent governor not only lost the election but also served a prison term for blasphemy. However, the same strategy proved less useful in the 2019 presidential elections. The Islamist coalition, led by the FPI, made an alliance with mainstream political parties to defeat the incumbent President Joko Widodo (Aspinall and Mietzner 2019). Widodo, who is Muslim, coopted a 212 Movement leader as his vice presidential running mate and won the election with a comfortable lead. Regardless of the outcome, the mass mobilization that preceded the election produced a dangerous polarization of Indonesian society along nationalist and religious lines that will define the terms of political contestation for years to come (Warburton 2020). Furthermore, the majoritarian ideas propagated by this right-wing movement managed to build significant inroads into moderate organizations like the NU and Muhammadiyah (Mietzner and Muhtadi 2020).

The similar trajectories but different electoral outcomes for right-wing populists in India and Indonesia highlight two major differences between the movements. First, Indonesia's Islamist organizations lack a charismatic figure like Narendra Modi to articulate their cause (Slater and Tudor 2019). While FPI's leader, Rizieq Shihab, temporarily managed to capture the public's attention with his fiery speeches and unrestrained manner, he did not have the personal appeal and credibility needed to sustain a populist movement and drive it to electoral victory. Similarly, Prabowo Subianto, a retired general who contested the presidential election against Joko Widodo, is a Suharto regime insider, who also lacks reformist credentials and personal charm. Second, the presence of large, moderate mass organizations in Indonesia, i.e., Muhammadiyah and NU, serve as a counterweight to radical demands by right-wing populists. Given the vastly different creed of Islam that these organizations subscribe to, it is not in their interest to seek enforcement of a uniform Islamic law by the state. The blasphemy issue momentarily brought these various factions together in the Jakarta election but split during the presidential elections, in which religious offense was not an issue.

A Concurrent Surge in Vigilantism

The populist transformation of ethnic politics in India and Indonesia, regardless of electoral outcomes, has altered the landscape of communal violence in both countries. In the past, violent contestation between ethnic groups took the form of communal riots that displaced or killed members of a rival group in large numbers, often with aim of securing an electoral advantage (Berenschot 2020). Increasingly, however, factions within right-wing populists in both cases have sanctioned and encouraged the use of vigilante violence to punish individual transgressions by members of minority groups, in order to assert their social dominance. There is much variation in vigilantism across India and Indonesia with regard to the specific offenses that are punished, identity of the victims, and political affiliation of the perpetrators. Yet, vigilantes follow a similar template of action in both cases that involves the *collective use of extra-legal violence to respond to perceived transgressions of social order*.¹

Data from India and Indonesia show a marked increase in incidents of vigilante violence over the past decade even as the scale of communal riots has declined (Figs. 1 and 2). Data from India recorded 254 incidents of mob violence targeting religious minorities between 2009 and 2018, resulting in 91 deaths and 579 injured victims (Human Rights Watch 2019, 3). About 90% of all recorded cases took place after BJP's electoral victory in May 2014. While vigilantism data from India focuses on violence against religious minorities, Indonesian data records incidents of vigilantism punishing a much broader set of transgressions including religious offense, heresy, theft, sorcery, and various moral offenses. The Indonesian data displays

¹ This definition is consistent with two leading conceptualization of vigilantism used in political science (Moncada 2017; Bateson 2020).

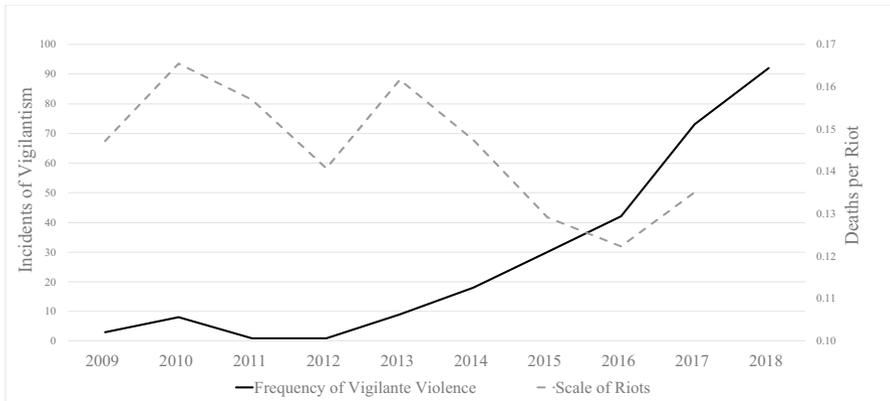


Fig. 1 Vigilantism and communal riots in India (2009–2017). Source: IndiaSpend (Author’s calculations based on IndiaSpend database on hate crimes. This data is no longer available on their website: Website FactChecker shuts down Hate Crime Watch database, Halarnkar resigns as IndiaSpend editor (scroll.in). These numbers were re-compiled from two secondary sources, as reported in Varma, Subodh. “Jharkhand’s 14th Lynching in Four Years, Country’s 266th.” NewsClick, June 25, 2019. <https://www.newslick.in/Mob-Lynching-India-Jharkhand-Hate-Crimes>; and Team, Factchecker. Data on riots compiled from “Fewer Riots, Minorities Safer Under Modi Regime: Kiren Rijju. But Claim On Safer Minorities Without Foundation,” January 9, 2019. <https://www.factchecker.in/fewer-riots-minorities-safer-under-modi-regime-kiren-rjiju-data-right-on-riots-but-claim-on-safer-minorities-without-foundation/>.)

trends that are similar to those observed in India: the rate of vigilantism incidents in Indonesia increased by 15% between 2007 and 2014, even as the impact of communal riots in the country declined sharply. However, the magnitude of violence recorded in Indonesia is much higher, due to the more granular local data sources

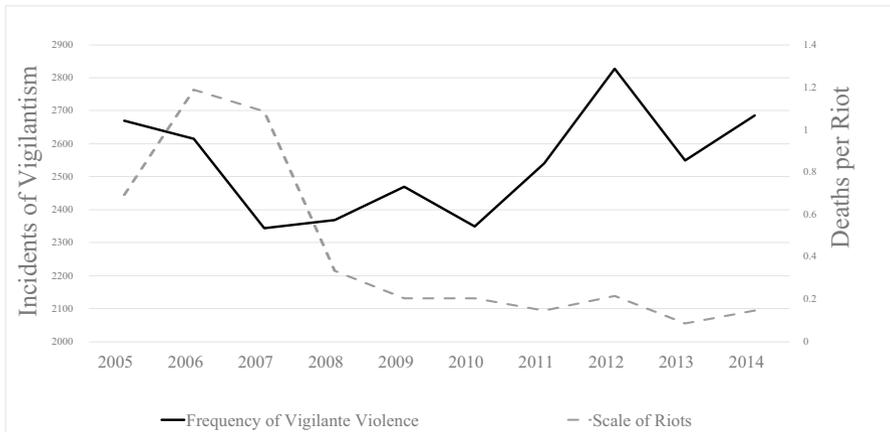


Fig. 2 Vigilantism and communal riots in Indonesia (2005–2014). Source: NVMS dataset (Authors’ calculations based on the NVMS dataset. For a detailed description of the definition and methodology used to collect vigilantism data, see Jaffrey (2019). For a broader description of the NVMS dataset, see Barron et al. (2016): Dataset available at <https://microdata.worldbank.org/index.php/catalog/2626>)

Table 1 Targets of right-wing vigilantism in India and Indonesia

	India	Indonesia
Religious offense	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cow slaughter and beef-consumption • Love-Jihad squads attack inter-religious couples • Incidents of cow vigilantism tend to be deadly • Vast majority of victims are Muslims 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alleged blasphemers • “Illegal” houses of worship or congregation of “heretic” sects • Sale of food during the day in the fasting month • Incidents involve physical beating and vandalism but have rarely been deadly • Victims are both Muslims and non-Muslims
Moral offense	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public display of affection between couples • Valentine’s day celebration • Incidents involve harassment and physical violence but are not deadly • Victims are urban youth 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sexual “deviance” (LGBTQ) and fornication • Sale of alcohol, prostitution, or gambling • Incidents involve harassment and physical violence but are not deadly • Victims are sexual minorities and small business owners

Summarized from reports in national and local level media sources between 2009 and 2019

and broader definition of vigilantism used during data collection.² In total, the Indonesian data registered 25,421 incidents of mob violence that led to 1605 deaths and 31,657 people who were gravely injured.

These trends illustrate how local affiliates of right-wing organizations in India and Indonesia have deployed vigilantism as a systematic strategy for undermining minority rights at the grassroots level, by doling out extra-legal punishment for two types of offenses (Table 1). First, there has been a remarkable increase in the use of mob violence to attack individuals accused of causing religious offense to the majority group. In India, the most brutal manifestation of this violence has surfaced in the form of lynching by cow protection vigilantes, who target individuals accused

² While this data is useful for illustrating similar in-country trends, it cannot be used to compare the magnitude of vigilantism between India and Indonesia because of vastly different data collection methodologies used in each country. In India, this data has been collected by the FactChecker at IndiaSpend from national media reports and is limited to communal incidents. In Indonesia, the data is from 16 provinces that comprise half of Indonesia’s population and represent all its major ethnic groups. The data is from the National Violence Monitoring Database collected from local media reports that provide more granular coverage of a much broader definition of vigilantism. For a detailed description of the definition and methodology used to collect vigilantism data, see Jaffrey (2019). For a broader description of the NVMS dataset, see Barron et al. 2016: Dataset available at <https://microdata.worldbank.org/index.php/catalog/2626>

of consuming beef or slaughtering cattle. The cow is considered a sacred animal by upper-caste Hindus in several parts of India, and many states in India ban cow slaughter. According to one widely regarded source, at least 133 incidents of cow-related vigilante violence have taken place in India between 2012 and 2019, resulting in a total of 290 victims and 50 deaths.³ An overwhelming majority of victims of deadly communal lynching (74%) have been Muslim, while the rest are Dalits. A typical incident of cow vigilantism involves a local mob of residents apprehending one or a few individuals, accusing them of cow slaughter, without proof. The victims are usually tied and collectively beaten, often to death, while being forced to admit their “crime” or chant Hindu prayers. In many cases, the incidents are recorded on camera by the perpetrators and widely disseminated on social media.

While there is no evidence to show that these lynchings have been officially sanctioned by senior leadership in the BJP, the party’s ambivalent response towards the violence indicates that vigilantism is indirectly tolerated in some factions and directly encouraged in others. Modi’s own response towards cow lynching has been the subject of much speculation, and scholars have noted that he has condemned the lynching of Dalits but not Muslims (Varshney 2019b, 339). At the regional level, some elected BJP politicians have openly praised convicted members of these lynch mobs as heroes and helped fund their legal defense.⁴ Evidence of the direct involvement of local affiliates of Sangh Parivar organizations, such as the Bajrang Dal, in assembling mobs and sanctioning deadly vigilante violence is well documented by journalists and human rights organizations (Human Rights Watch 2019; Ali 2020).

These local chapters, involved in cow vigilantism, have gradually expanded their scope of activities to punish other forms of religious offense. They are part of a growing movement to prevent inter-marriage between Muslim men and Hindu women by forming anti-love-*jihad* squads.⁵ Hindutva groups have long accused Muslims of forcefully converting Hindu women by luring them with love and promise of marriage. Local vigilante squads detect inter-religious couples from their social media profiles or applications for marriage licenses and list their names and identities on an online portal. The couples are then harassed and threatened with violence by a dedicated team of local volunteers, until they either split up or go into hiding. Furthermore, right-wing vigilantes have also launched the “*ghar wapsi*” (return home) initiative to forcefully “re-convert” Christians, Muslims, and other non-Hindus to Hinduism (Katju 2015).

³ IndiaSpend. “Every Third Indian Cop Thinks Mob Violence Over Cow Slaughter Is ‘Natural’: New Survey,” August 28, 2019, sec. Latest Reports. <https://www.indiaspend.com/every-third-indian-cop-thinks-mob-violence-over-cow-slaughter-is-natural-new-survey/>.

⁴ “BJP Helped with Legal Fees of Jharkhand Lynching Accused: Jayant Sinha.” The Week. Accessed February 9, 2021. <https://www.theweek.in/news/india/2019/05/03/bjp-helped-with-legal-fees-lynching-accused-minister-jayant-sinha.html>.

⁵ Gowen, Annie. “A Muslim and a Hindu Thought They Could Be a Couple. Then Came the ‘Love Jihad’ Hit List.” Washington Post, April 26, 2018, sec. Asia & Pacific. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/a-muslim-and-a-hindu-thought-they-could-be-a-couple-then-came-the-love-jihad-hit-list/2018/04/26/257010be-2d1b-11e8-8dc9-3b51e028b845_story.html.

In Indonesia, the direct involvement of right-wing populists in vigilante violence is clear because the FPI and their affiliates take public credit for their attacks. Vigilantism against perceived religious offenses has grown over the years, both in frequency and in scope, but compared to India, it is far less deadly. Between 2005 and 2014, a total of 335 incidents and 1028 victims of mob attacks against accused religious offenders were recorded in Indonesia.⁶ One fatality related to religious offense vigilantism was recorded in a 2012 attack on a mosque belonging to an allegedly heretical sect (Panggabean and Fauzi 2015). Initially, vigilantism involved sporadic, organized raids by the FPI and its affiliates on street vendors selling food during fasting hours in the month of Ramadan. These raids, often accompanied by a local policeman, led to harassment, extortion, and vandalism but rarely ever led to serious injuries and never deaths (Bertrand 2010). About a decade ago, the FPI began organizing local members and residents to attack minority houses of worship and temporary congregations, accusing them of operating without a proper permit (Crouch 2010; Soedirgo 2018). In most cases, the threat of imminent violence is enough for victims to comply with the vigilantes' demands. When victims resist, they are punished with collective mob beating.

Vigilante attacks on alleged blasphemers increased rapidly after the FPI's successful campaign against the Jakarta governor in 2016. The organization launched a nationwide campaign to find and punish individuals accused of blasphemy or insulting remarks about its leaders (Jaffrey and Mulyartono 2017). Within 3 months, the FPI and its affiliates attacked at least 59 individuals accused of expressing derogatory remarks about a religious preacher or criticizing religious edicts (*fatwa*). The FPI-affiliated Cyber Muslim Army began scanning online content of people in their network to detect blasphemous remarks. In a typical incident, a suspected offender would be reported to the central committee of the organization, who instructed local members in the offender's residential or workplace to respond to the offense. The accused offender would be visited by a mob, beaten, intimidated, and forced to sign an apology. Videos of the attacks and images of the forced apologies were widely circulated by vigilantes on their social media platforms, terrorizing the organizations' critics. It is important to note that despite their high frequency, none of these incidents resulted in a grave injury or death because most victims complied with FPI's demands for written apologies and were evicted from their houses by local authorities to prevent further violence.

The second type of vigilantism perpetrated by right-wing groups is directed against "moral offenses." In India, this movement initially started with the RSS and the VHP efforts to ban "western" cultural influences in society. The main target of these efforts was the celebration of Valentine's Day in urban settings. In an annual performance, members of these organizations would descend on malls and other commercial public spaces to vandalize vendors selling occasion-specific merchandise and harass young couples by smearing their faces with black paint.⁷ After the

⁶ Author's calculations based on the National Violence Monitoring System Dataset.

⁷ Flock, Elizabeth. "The War on Valentine's Day in India." *The Atlantic*, February 14, 2018. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/02/protecting-valentines-day-in-india/553244/>.

BJP's rise to power, these efforts for moral policing have become more frequent and are often conducted in partnership with local police. Some states have set up dedicated anti-Romeo squads to prevent young men from loitering outside women's colleges and discourage unmarried couples from socializing in public places.⁸ These squads, often a combination of a citizen mob and a local policeman, conduct raids on public spaces and check couples' IDs. In some cases, those found "guilty" are subjected to public humiliation such as beating and head-shaving.

Moral policing in Indonesia is also conducted primarily by local chapters of the FPI. In the past, such incidents typically involved attacks on "places of sin" such as gambling dens, prostitution hubs, and alcohol shops to temporarily shut down these establishments and extort money. Of late, however, religious organizations have sought to work together with civic leaders in lower-middle-class residential areas to monitor the presence of LGBTQ individuals and regulate relations between unmarried couples.⁹ When such an offender is detected, a group of local residents along with right-wing affiliates raid the victims' residence to collect "evidence." The presence of multiple men in a room, with alcohol and condoms, can be considered sufficient evidence of homosexuality. Possession of cigarettes and condoms by single women can be considered proof of sexual dalliance or prostitution. Alleged offenders, apprehended by vigilante squads, are usually subjected to a collective beating before being forcefully evicted from the premises.

What Makes Vigilantism Useful for Populists?

Populism and vigilantism are complementary concepts. Both identify groups, individuals, or acts that pose a threat to an amorphous definition of "the people" and are rooted in the idea that direct exercise of popular sovereignty is necessary for managing these threats. Populists and vigilantes are also similar in that they act by defying constraints of the law, often deriding it as an elitist construct that is obstructing progress. Populist parties and politicians work towards this goal by seeking electoral victory and thus control of the state for re-ordering society according to their vision. This requires financial and ideological resources for mass mobilization of voters who can deliver a mandate for course correction of democracy. Vigilantes achieve the same effect by using punitive violence to enforce boundaries of acceptable behavior, with relatively fewer resources and smaller-scale mobilization.

Conceptual complementarity does not mean that populism and vigilantism always co-occur. There is a rich body of scholarship that explains quotidian forms of crime-control vigilantism as a function of weak state capacity, discriminatory law enforcement, extreme insecurity in the aftermath of civil war, and public dissatisfaction with

⁸ "Police Watched As Anti-Romeo Squad Allegedly Shaved Man's Head In UP's Shahjahanpur." *HuffPost India*, April 1, 2017. https://www.huffingtonpost.in/2017/04/01/police-watched-as-anti-romeo-squad-allegedly-shaved-mans-head-i_a_22021252/.

⁹ Adam, Aulia. "Nasib LGBT di Indonesia: Target Kebencian, Razia, dan Penjara RKUHP." *tirto.id*, July 11, 2018. <https://tirto.id/nasib-lgbt-di-indonesia-target-kebencian-razia-dan-penjara-rkuhp-cNUQ>.

formal laws (Abrahams 1998; Goldstein 2004; Bateson 2013; Smith 2019). Several scholars have also observed the utilization of militias and vigilante organizations by non-populist political organizations to achieve their ideological goals (Acemoglu et al. 2009; Staniland 2015; Turnbull 2021). When populism and vigilante violence do intersect, as they do in India and Indonesia, right-wing populism is not especially more likely to lead to vigilantism than other varieties of populism. In fact, there is a long history of left-wing vigilantism within these two countries. Hundreds of victims were lynched by leftist mobs between 1982 and 1984 under Communist rule in West Bengal (Biswas 2017). The Indonesian Communist party also led a violent campaign against large land owners in Java before its own elimination by the Indonesian military in 1965, aided by vigilante squads (Fealy 2010). A contemporary example of non-right-wing populists using vigilantism comes from the Philippines, where President Duterte's anti-crime movement, often dubbed as "penal populism," triggered a spree of vigilante attacks on alleged drug peddlers (Curato 2016; Kenny and Holmes 2020).

Efficient mechanism for regulating behavior

Vigilantes' selective focus on individual transgressions and their use of spectacular violence make vigilantism a highly *efficient* form of collective violence. Large-scale violence, such as riots and communal clashes, establish ethnic dominance through the collective elimination or displacement of a rival group. These confrontational tactics are costly both in terms of mobilization and the possibility of repressive response from state authorities. In contrast, vigilantes can achieve the same result by regulating the behavior of their rivals through frequent and spectacular punishment of individual infractions. By targeting specific offenses rather than the ascriptive identities of a rival, vigilantes demarcate boundaries of acceptable behavior. The public spectacle created by lynching, through the use of gruesome violence in front of a cheering crowd, communicates the dire consequences of non-compliance (Wood 2011; Fujii 2017).

The use of discriminate violence against individuals rather than indiscriminate attacks against an entire group creates the expectation that potential victims can avoid violent sanction if they accept vigilantes' domination and adjust their behavior accordingly. Thus, while individual acts of vigilantism are much smaller in scale compared to riots and pogroms, their cumulative effect on establishing social dominance can be just as powerful, while being much less resource intensive. Vigilantism's efficiency in soliciting a large degree of compliance with relatively small amount of violence explains the parallel decline in communal riots alongside a rise in vigilante incidents observed in India and Indonesia, indicating a switch in strategy by right-wing groups.

The Indian case is particularly useful for demonstrating how vigilantism helps right-wing populists achieve their goals. During past communal riots, mobs attacked entire Muslim neighborhoods. In the most recent string of cow vigilantism, however, mob violence has been used more selectively against Muslim individuals, who are accused (often falsely) of offending Hindu sensibilities by consuming beef. As

horrific videos of the victims' ordeal from multiple incidents surfaced on social media, Muslim meat traders shut down their businesses in anticipation of violence, effectively complying with right-wing demands for a complete ban on sale of meat.¹⁰ In Indonesia, vigilante raids on worship by "deviant" Muslim sects rarely result in deadly violence because the credibility of the threat of violence by FPI affiliates is well-established. In a typical incident, a mob shows up outside a religious event and demands that the organizers end all proceedings, effectively giving their targets an opportunity to avoid violence by "correcting" their behavior. In most cases, the victims comply with these demands and, in anticipation of violence in the future, move their religious activities to other venues. This collective compliance of minority groups seeking to avoid individual punishment has the cumulative effect of fulfilling the FPI's demands for a complete ban on unorthodox versions of Islam.

Transformative Form of Violent Lobbying

The moral claims advanced by vigilantes to further their cause can make their actions *transformative*. Unlike anarchists that dispute the state's authority or insurgents that seek to usurp it, vigilantes pursue their goals by bending the state to their will. Individual acts of vigilantism have limited, often local impact. For example, a neighborhood known for punishing homosexuality and gambling may drive away potential violators from that particular area. But, when vigilantism becomes routinized and widespread, it cumulatively serves as an expression of critical citizenship that asserts popular sovereignty over the state (Smith 2019). By appealing to "shared" norms and demanding "justice" for their violation, vigilantes seek broader enforcement of their political or social vision.

Two kinds of transformations can be brought about through systematic use of vigilantism as a form of violent lobbying. One involves harsher enforcement of existing laws by the state. This appears to be the case in India where the spate of cow lynchings has led to the harsher enforcement of "cow protection laws."¹¹ More recently, vigilante raids by anti-love Jihad squads have prompted the enactment of formal state-level laws to ban marriage between Muslim men and Hindu women.¹² Similarly, in Indonesia, vigilantism against blasphemy has led to a nationwide crack-down on free speech as the police's cyber division monitors and reports anyone making remotely controversial remarks about Muslim preachers in a bid to prevent mob attacks (Crouch 2012).

Another legal transformation vigilantism can bring about is the expansion of the state's purview into previously ungoverned domains. In Indonesia, this strategy has

¹⁰ Bureau. "Yogi Adityanath's Uttar Pradesh: Meat Traders, Butchers Feel the Heat, Shut Slaughterhouses in Panic." *India Today*, March 21, 2017. <https://www.indiatoday.in/mail-today/story/uttar-pradesh-yogi-adityanath-meat-slaughterhouses-bjp-muslims-966683-2017-03-21>.

¹¹ Sharma, Saurabh. "Indian State Uses Draconian Law to Detain Those Accused of Killing Cows." *Reuters*, September 11, 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-india-crime-idUKKBN2621GY>.

¹² Apoorvanand. "India's 'Love Jihad' Laws: Another Attempt to Subjugate Muslims." Accessed February 9, 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/1/15/indias-love-jihad-laws-another-attempt-to-subjugate-muslims>.

successfully nudged the state into regulation of sexual behavior and intra-religious disputes. For example, planned revisions to the Indonesian penal code seek to criminalize LGBT relations and sex outside of marriage.¹³ Furthermore, in the wake of sustained vigilante violence against the country's Ahmadiyah minority, national and local governments across the country have issued regulations that restrict freedom of worship for members of this beleaguered sect (ICG 2008).

Does the adoption of right-wing populist demands by the state and their incorporation into the formal legal code appease vigilantes and reduce the incidence of vigilantism? Right-wing populists in both India and Indonesia have repeatedly claimed that their affiliates are compelled to take matters into their own hands because the law and its enforcement do not reflect their desired level of punitiveness. In response, elected lawmakers routinely propose to appease vigilantes through the enactment of more stringent laws to punish religious offenses.

Evidence from India and Indonesia shows that enforcement of harsh laws by the state is actually associated with higher levels of vigilantism. In India, preliminary data suggests that 54% of cow lynchings are concentrated in six states that have the strictest restrictions on cattle slaughter and transport (CJP 2018). In Indonesia too, vigilantism against moral offenses is highest in areas with the strictest regional regulations. For example, the Aceh province maintains a parallel system of Sharia law to punish moral offenses in addition to the national criminal code that does not regulate morality. The Sharia code is implemented by provincially funded municipal police, and special courts give out harsh punishment, such as public canning, for adultery, fornication, and homosexuality. Despite the enactment of harsher laws, the data show that the rate of vigilantism against moral offenses in Aceh is three times higher than the national average, even though the rate of vigilantism against criminal offenses, such as theft, is the same (Jaffrey 2019, 198).

What Is Enabling Vigilantism by Right-Wing Populists?

Strategic value of vigilantism or its conceptual complementarity with populism does not automatically enable its use by right-wing groups. Hostility or hatred towards ethnic minorities and migrants may result in sporadic persecution or hate crimes against them. However, the systematic violent targeting of minorities by right-wing populists in India and Indonesia cannot be inferred from their majoritarian ideology alone. After all, the rise in vigilantism observed across these two cases has taken place despite a significant reduction in previously more prevalent forms of communal violence, most notably riots. Understanding the deployment of vigilantism by right-wing populists thus requires not just an explanation for the use of violence but of factors that are enabling the use of this particular form of violence. Three factors, common to India and Indonesia, are identified below.

¹³ Knight, Kyle. "Criminalizing Indonesia's LGBT People Won't Protect Them." Human Rights Watch, February 14, 2018. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/02/14/criminalizing-indonesias-lgbt-people-wont-protect-them>.

Constitutional Barriers to Legislative Change Incentivize Extra-Legal Measures

When pluralist constitutions make it difficult for right-wing populists to curtail minority rights through top-down legislative change, vigilantism emerges as an appealing out-of-system strategy for undermining these rights from the bottom up. Both India and Indonesia are endowed with constitutions that reflect an inclusive conceptualization of nation, designed to build consensus for unity across a diverse set of religious, ethnic, and linguistic groups. A fundamental renegotiation of the rights and freedoms enshrined in these constitutions is difficult for right-wing populists, regardless of their electoral success. The BJP's efforts to enact the highly discriminative Citizenship Amendment Bill (CAB) in India passed the legislative threshold but was met with massive protests. The provisions of the bill that define an individual's faith as a criterion for obtaining citizenship were mainly designed to disempower millions of Indian Muslims, who might not have documentation to prove their citizenship status. The protests, however, came not just from the Muslim communities but from a much broader coalition of ethnic, civic, and linguistic groups who saw the law as a fundamental violation of the constitution that could set a precedent for discrimination against other minorities. Citing concerns about constitutionality, several chief ministers publicly pledged not to implement the bill in their states. In the face of this overwhelming opposition, the BJP government eventually deferred the implementation of the law.

In Indonesia, efforts to insert Islam in the constitution as a principle for governing the country's Muslims are periodically attempted, without success. One reason for this is that right-wing populists do not have the numbers in parliament to affect such a change. More importantly, however, even mainstream Muslim organizations are hesitant to make such a move because ideological diversity among them makes it difficult to decide whose version of Islam will be adopted. The few times that right-wing populists in parliament, particularly the PKS, have used their influence to align existing laws with their narrow ideas of religious morality, they have failed. The most recent example of this is the 2019 attempt to revise Indonesia's Criminal Code to include fornication and homosexuality as punishable offenses. As with the CAB in India, the move in Indonesia was met with violent protests from civil society groups and its enactment had to be tabled indefinitely.

In the face of these constitutional barriers to top-down legislative change, right-wing populists in India and Indonesia have turned to vigilantism for reconstituting everyday notions of right and wrong in society, paving the way for legislation that can formally align the law with their narrow idea of the nation. By publicly punishing individual infractions of their desired social order with brutal violence, right-wing vigilantes can create a deterrence effect, whereby minorities adjust their own behavior even in the absence of laws compelling them to do so. In Indonesia where violent mob attacks against minority houses of worship have compelled them to curtail their religious activities.

Apart from regulation of minority behavior, right-wing populists have also used vigilantism as a form of violent lobbying to get the state to do their bidding. This is achieved either by passing new local regulations on religious offense or by using their official positions to “broker” solutions that intimidate victims into accepting the vigilantes’ demands. This co-production of vigilantism can be most clearly seen in India’s anti-love Jihad laws, where state police actively deploy vigilante groups for assistance in finding and apprehending alleged offenders. Local police in Indonesia have also accompanied the FPI’s anti-vice squads, often to convince the victims to agree to their demands to avoid violence.

Finally, for right-wing populists looking to build a broad coalition of support within the religious majority they represent, vigilantism has the added appeal of being more customizable than formal legislation. For example, while Hindutva proponents have terrorized Muslims with cow vigilantism in states like UP, Haryana, and MP, they have avoided taking similar measures in the north-east and southern states where Hindus also consume beef (Andersen and Damle 2019).

Everyday Vigilantism Provides Local Templates for National Causes

Social legitimacy associated with quotidian forms of vigilantism allows right-wing populists to scale up local templates of violence for national goals. Everyday forms of crime-control vigilantism are common across India and Indonesia against suspected thieves, child abductors, and sorcerers. Disillusioned with inadequate provision of order by the state or compelled by a heightened sense of insecurity, ordinary citizens take the law into their own hands (Abrahams 1998; Welsh 2008; Bateson 2020). Vigilantes intercept the state’s authority by following a template of action that involves (a) asserting their sovereignty over a territory such as a neighborhood or a town, (b) classifying acts as offensive, (c) judging the guilt of an offender, and (d) determining a satisfactory level of violence as punishment before dispensing it.

This template of everyday vigilantism produces discursive and behavioral infrastructure that makes its replication possible at a much larger scale. The collective experience of violent adjudication along with the rituals and language that gradually build around vigilantism endows the act with broad legitimacy. Instead of being viewed as a legal violation or a challenge to the state, vigilantism finds resonance as a regrettable but necessary correction to an ineffectual system by righteous citizens. Populist leaders who define their agenda in opposition to “public enemies” can draw on this infrastructure and scale up templates of vigilantism against local transgressors to national foes.

This scaling-up of everyday vigilantism can be seen in Indonesia where right-wing populists explicitly liken their mob attacks on alleged blasphemers with routine lynching of thieves that is highly prevalent across the country and a much more widely acceptable form of violence (Jaffrey 2020). Indian states with the highest concentration of right-wing vigilantism are also those where other non-communal forms of vigilantism are most prevalent. For example, Jharkand, one of the worst-affected states by right-wing populism, has recorded 14 mob attacks against

religious minorities since 2014.¹⁴ During the same period, 173 women were lynched in the state after being accused of practicing witchcraft.¹⁵

While the utilization of local templates of vigilantism for targeting national “enemies” is similar across India and Indonesia, the differences in ideological orientation of right-wing populists are reflected in the targets of their attacks. Because the Hindutva narrative in India has persistently classified threats to the nation as “external,” i.e., from non-Hindus with a heavy emphasis on building inter-caste support for the movement, right-wing vigilantism in India is mostly directed against non-Hindus, in particular Muslims, apart from lower-caste Hindus. In contrast, Islamist organizations in Indonesia are not only concerned about policing the behavior of non-Muslim minorities but are equally concerned with re-defining the boundaries of religious practice for other Muslims who do not subscribe to their hardline views. As a result, right-wing vigilantism against religious offense in Indonesia tends to punish both Muslims and non-Muslims.

State Complicity Provides Impunity for Vigilantism

The risk of vigilante violence increases when vigilantes develop the ability to collude with state officials and shield themselves from the consequences of engaging in extra-legal violence (Jaffrey 2019). Unlike interpersonal violence, like murder, rape, or assault, vigilantism is essentially a public form of violence that is performed in front of an audience. As such, the act of killing or maiming a victim in full public view, often in the presence of recording devices, documents the perpetrators’ involvement in a criminal act. This makes vigilantes vulnerable to the possibility of legal consequences, such as arrest and prosecution by state agents. These risks are also present in other kinds of collective violence, such as riots. However, unlike riots that are relatively episodic events, the political impact of vigilantism derives from repeated acts of violence that can establish consistent expectation of punishment for offensive behavior among victims. This is why one-time impunity is not enough for vigilantes to feel secure. Instead, they require longer-term assurances of protection from state officials who (a) are accessible to them on a regular basis and (b) have the necessary authority to shield vigilantes from reprisals.

In India and Indonesia, the everyday exercise of state authority is highly contingent on societal cooperation and requires state officials to manage competing demands for the supply of coercion, which may be “constructive or destructive, legal or extra-legal” (Jauregui 2016, 14). Exercising this “provisional” form of authority involves negotiating jurisdictions, coaxing resources, and trading favors with those who have their own competing claims to authority. In navigating these daily processes, the most valuable resource available to local officials is a small amount of discretion that they can use to prioritize their tasks and manage their own workload

¹⁴ Varma, Subodh. “Jharkhand’s 14th Lynching in Four Years, Country’s 266th.” *NewsClick*, June 25, 2019. <https://www.newsclick.in/Mob-Lynching-India-Jharkhand-Hate-Crimes>.

¹⁵ Kunal Purohit, IndiaSpend. “What’s to Blame for Jharkhand’s ‘Witch-Hunting’ Problem? Poor Healthcare and Illiteracy.” *Scroll.In*. Accessed February 11, 2021. <https://scroll.in/article/955045/whats-to-blame-for-jharkhands-witch-hunting-problem-poor-healthcare-and-illiteracy>.

(Lipsky 1980). Impunity for vigilantism is produced as a form of this discretionary resource by local police who need the cooperation of right-wing leaders in their areas to dispense their daily tasks. However, differences in law-enforcement organization across the two countries generate different levels of impunity for vigilantes and therefore different intensity of vigilante violence.

In India, right-wing vigilantism tends to be far more brutal and deadly as its police structure is highly susceptible to vigilantes' demands for impunity. This is because right-wing populists exercise direct control over a highly decentralized police force. India has a long history of elected leaders using their political influence over local officers for selective law enforcement in order to stop or encourage violence against minorities (Wilkinson 2006). Since their election to multiple regional legislatures, BJP politicians have repeatedly called for violence against those suspected of eating beef (Human Rights Watch 2019, 4), effectively giving their local affiliates a "free pass" for mob violence against minorities.¹⁶ As a consequence, the highest number of deadly cow lynchings across India was recorded in BJP-ruled states.¹⁷

Investigations into individual incidents of vigilantism show how right-wing populists use their political leverage over local police to delay filing of complaints, falsify official records, conceal evidence, and in some cases directly assist the vigilantes in perpetrating the lynching (Chatterjee 2015; Human Rights Watch 2019; Ali 2020).

Right-wing groups in Indonesia enjoy a much lower level of impunity than their Indian counterparts. As a result, their attacks are limited to intimidation, physical beating, and vandalism but rarely result in deaths. This difference can be attributed to the fact that right-wing populists do not exert direct administrative control over the police. Unlike the BJP, Indonesian Islamists and their electoral allies have persistently failed to do well in national polls. Even though Islamist politicians have succeeded in provincial and municipal elections, Indonesia's centralized police structure, commanded by the President, has prevented local politicians from directly intervening to shield vigilantes from legal prosecution.

Right-wing vigilantes' main influence over the police derives from the political value they offer to national-level politicians and high-level police chiefs, looking to signal their "Islam-friendly" credentials. Recall that under the New Order (1966–1998), state officials, especially security forces were highly repressive towards Muslims, who were considered a threat to the regime. After democratization, the majority Muslim vote-base compelled a reversal of this logic. Politicians from nationalist parties as well as high-level security officials began displaying their piety by appearing in high-profile events with Muslim preachers from different ideological backgrounds in order to thwart accusations of antagonism towards Islam.

Public support for groups like the FPI was especially championed under the rule of President Yudhoyono, who had served as a military general during the New Order (Fealy 2015). Ministers and police chiefs followed his lead and cultivated strong

¹⁶ "Free Pass for Mobs': India Urged to Stem Vigilante Violence against Minorities." *The Guardian*, February 19, 2019, sec. World news. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/feb/19/a-free-pass-for-mobs-to-kill-india-urged-to-stem-cow-vigilante-violence>.

¹⁷ "Cow-Related Violence: 86% Dead Since 2010 Are Muslim; 97% Attacks Reported After 2014." *The Wire*. Accessed February 13, 2021. <https://thewire.in/government/cow-related-violence>.

ties with FPI leadership, despite their escalating attacks against minorities. Another reason for keeping the FPI close was because the group's self-styled militia could be used as an "attack dog" to break up anti-government protests and harass critics. Under pressure from their superiors to keep the peace with these groups, local police were compelled to give right-wing vigilantes some latitude in conducting their activities while keeping the violence in check. The police accomplished this goal by accompanying the vigilantes on their raids and intimidating their victims to yield to their demands so that the violence does not get out of hand. In doing so, the police prevented high levels of violence against minorities but effectively assumed the enforcement of right-wing demands.

It is no wonder then that the frequency of right-wing vigilantism against minorities in Indonesia increased rapidly during the Yudhoyono presidency (Bush 2015). However, things began to change after 2014 when the FPI and its affiliates began taking a confrontational approach towards the newly elected President Widodo. The 2016 Defense of Islam rallies mobilized to demand the conviction of Jakarta's governor and the spate of glaring attacks against moderate Muslims accused of blasphemy further soured relations between the FPI and the central government. In 2017, the FPI's firebrand leader Rizieq Shihab was exiled after being charged by the police with possession of pornographic material. When he forced a return home in 2020 to challenge the government once again, the police killed 6 of his bodyguards in an encounter-style shooting and banned the FPI after accusing it of maintaining terrorist ties. This latest confrontation effectively ended a long period of impunity for right-wing vigilantes in Indonesia and, for the time being, their attacks against minorities.

Conclusion

While most of the current scholarship has focused on studying right-wing populists by evaluating their electoral fortunes and governance strategies, this article expounds the *social* route to success taken by these movements. It compares recent political developments in Asia's two largest democracies to show how right-wing populists are deploying vigilantism as a strategy for dismantling democratic protections against majoritarian tyranny from the bottom up. It is argued that the strategic value of vigilantism as an efficient and transformative form of violence makes it an appealing tool for right-wing populists, seeking to re-order society according to a majoritarian logic.

However, the systematic use of vigilantism by right-wing populists in India and Indonesia cannot be inferred from their majoritarian ideology alone. This article identifies three factors that are enabling right-wing populists to use vigilantism for political ends. First, because pluralist constitutions make it difficult to curtail minority rights through top-down legislation, vigilantism has emerged as an appealing extra-legal strategy for undermining these rights from the bottom up. Second, widespread social legitimacy associated with everyday forms of vigilantism allows right-wing populists to scale up local templates of violence for national goals. Third,

similar pathologies of state-building in both countries have enabled right-wing vigilantes to obtain impunity for violence by colluding with state officials.

For Hindu right-wing groups in India, vigilantism provides a way to consolidate their electoral success and expedite the enforcement of their ideological vision at the grassroots level. In Indonesia, Islamists have deployed vigilantism as a substitute for lack of electoral success by regulating the behavior of religious minorities with daily threats of violence. The politicization of this quotidian form of small-scale violence by right-wing populists has transformed vigilantism from the public's way of occasionally bypassing an ineffective state into a systematic strategy for engineering social dominance.

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Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

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