

# **Populist bromance: a poststructuralist analysis to Modi and Jokowi's public performance**

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## **Abstract:**

This article explores the state of populism in two of the largest democracies in the world: India and Indonesia. The analysis is focused on the public performances of each country's political leader: Prime Minister Narendra Modi (India) and President Joko Widodo (Indonesia). By applying the poststructuralist and socio-cultural approaches to populism, this study demonstrates what is the definition of 'the people' that Modi and Widodo promote, who is included and excluded from it, and how is the process of identification with the citizenship achieved. The data under study were retrieved from the National Speeches, and Tweets delivery by the leaders between 2015 and 2019.

**Keywords:** populism, democracy, identity, discourse analysis, Twitter

## **1. Introduction**

India and Indonesia are considered emblematic examples of democratization in Asia, mainly because despite the socio-cultural complexity of each country's political domain, democracy has been stable (Mechkova and Povitkina, 2016; V-Dem, 2017). Both are large ex-colonial territories with multi-ethnic, multilingual and multi-religious regional diversity that have been achieving important advances in the implementation of the electoral and liberal *dimensions of democracy* (Dahl, 1998, p. 19). Since its independence from Britain in 1947, political leaders in India have been increasing government responsiveness to citizens through electoral competition, free operation of political and civil society organizations, and freedom of expression. Regarding the liberal dimension of democracy, India follows a constitution that protects citizens' civil liberties and ensures the protection of minorities' rights throughout a federal government system (Sharma, 2006; V-Dem, 2017). In Indonesia, the first general elections were held in 1955, ten years after its independence from the Dutch, but it wasn't until 1998 that free presidential elections have been uninterruptedly held in Indonesia. The Indonesian Constitution protects civil rights and follows *the rule of law* through a presidential electoral system.

Despite the above, specialists have been alerting people to the seemingly illiberal changes to democracy in both countries. In India, since the victory of the Hindu Nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)<sup>1</sup> with its leader Narendra Modi in 2014, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty

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<sup>1</sup> The BJP (1980) origins traced back to 1951 when its precursor - the Bharatiya Jan Sangh (BJS)- was created by a member of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). The RSS is a Hindu supremacist organisation that wants India

International have been increasingly informing incidences of human rights violations in the country, specifically regarding lower-caste and religious minorities' (Amnesty International, 2015a, 2016a, 2017a, 2018a, 2018a; Human Rights Watch, 2015a, 2016a, 2017a). Some of the accusations directly blame the government, citing arbitrary detentions, torture, and extrajudicial executions executed by the military. There are also allegations of hate crimes committed by civilians, such as rapes, lynching and murders that predominantly affect the Muslim population. What calls the attention of the Human Rights protection organisations, is that India is a country with progressive legal reform, where the courts are ruling regularly; despite this, the judiciary has failed to punish crimes in which the victims are Dalits, Adivasi, or Muslim (Al Jazeera, 2019b, 2019c, 2019d, 2019e, 2019a; Mukhopadhyay, 2019; Prabhu, 2017). Additionally, while the allegations of torture and extrajudicial killings committed by state security forces persist, journalist and the opposition have limited freedom of speech. Some of them have been persecuted after questioning the impunity on crimes affecting minorities, which suggests that liberal democracy is affected in India (Al Jazeera, 2019b; Amnesty International, 2018a; Human Rights Watch, 2019a; Prabhu, 2017).

In Indonesia, the democratisation process has been highly chequered. Sukarno, leader of the independence, was declared president in the first general elections held in 1955. Early in his regime (1957), Sukarno established the 'Guided Democracy', an authoritarian measure that increased the power of the Executive. By the beginning of the sixties, two ideological forces were gaining support and fostering polarisation in Indonesia: the anti-communist army, and the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI - Partai Komunis Indonesia) (McGregor, 2009). The tension both forces continued increasing, as well as the rumours of a coup against Sukarno (Głąb, 2018). The president died in 1965, and the coup threats were eliminated by the Army Strategic Reserve, led by Suharto (McGregor, 2009). Suharto wrested political power in 1967, and was formally appointed president in 1968. He decided to eradicate any trace of the opposition by starting what he called the *De-Sukarnoization*, a political campaign to eliminate any remains of Sukarno's regime. This was accompanied by the 'Communist Purge' (1965-1967), in which an estimated range from 100,000 to 2 million<sup>2</sup> people died (McGregor, 2009; Roosa, 2015). This was a massacre in which the victims were 'members of the Communist Party of Indonesia (Partai Komunis Indonesia, PKI), people suspected of favouring the communists, and the Chinese minority (automatically included in any of the previous groups)' (Głąb, 2018, p. 14). Suharto remained in power until 1998; since then, a gradual democratization processes began. The first direct presidential elections took place in 2004 and nowadays, Indonesia is a unitary democratic republic with periodic presidential and legislative elections (Mechkova and Povitkina, 2016).

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to be a Hindu nation. Narendra Modi, like many other leaders of the BJP, is a lifelong member of the RSS (Al Jazeera, 2019a)

<sup>2</sup> The number of victims varies depending on which account is believed.

Nevertheless, Indonesia is a country where the political opposition brutally disappeared, and even to date, the government has not accounted for those crimes. There are only hypotheses of who was responsible for the genocide and the reasons why it happened. There are no reports of the killings or torture; there is no record in the media from the time, because it was discredited and also disappeared. The ‘successful’ democratization in Indonesia was built over a recent history of torture, oppression and abuse for which motives and perpetrators remain unclear.

In 2014, Joko Widodo (Jokowi) was elected president of Indonesia. Even though he claims to be proud of the state of democracy and *the rule of law* in the country, every year since his election, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have been reporting on the continuous violations of minorities’ rights in the archipelago; particularly, freedom of expression and peaceful assembly seem to be under threat. (Amnesty International, 2018b, 2017b, 2016b, 2015b; Human Rights Watch, 2018, 2017b, 2017b, 2016b, 2015b). Since 2015, attacks (persecution, arbitrary imprisonment) affecting Chinese Buddhist, Christian, and Hindu minorities have been reported (East Asia Forum, 2019; Mietzner, 2018; Power, 2018). Public caning has been used as punishment in some regions (Amnesty International, 2018c; Reuters, 2018), and abuses towards the media remain constant in the West Papua Conflict (Amnesty International, 2016b; Human Rights Watch, 2019b). Specialists are arguing that Widodo has an open agenda of repression and disempowerment of the political opposition, which is primarily expressed media censorship, and impunity of hate crimes (Amnesty International, 2018b; East Asia Forum, 2019; Human Rights Watch, 2019c; Power, 2018).

India and Indonesia are by no means isolated cases. Recently, the strength of liberal democracy has been questioned around the world, as it happened with Trump in the US (Innerarity, 2018), Orban in Hungary (Altena, 2017; Buzogány, 2017), Bolsonaro in Brazil (Hunter and Power, 2019; Weizenmann, 2019), the PiS in Poland (Sadurski, 2019), and Duterte in the Philippines (Carmina Yu Untalan, 2017; Thompson, 2016). Scholars have named these political phenomena differently: the *decline of democracy* (Ágh, 2016; Chou, 2015; Hopia, 2013; Power, 2018), a pullback to *authoritarianism*, the *crisis/ breakdown/ backsliding/ erosion/ retreat of democracy* (Greskovits, 2015; Hobson, 2018; Mainwaring, 2006; Runciman, 2018; Wike and Fetterolf, 2018). What all of these categories have in common, is that have been analysed through the electoral performance of political leaders; either through their campaigns or their decisions when in power. The focus on ‘the leader’ has led specialists to analyse the state of democracy throughout populism theories, adding several adjectives to the category: Republican Populism (Shogan, 2007), Xenophobic Populism (Deangelis, 2003), Reactionary Populism (Ziai, 2004), Civic Populism (Boyte, 2003). The commonly suggested for the South Asian context is *authoritarian populism* (Chacko, 2018; Hall, 1990; Power, 2018).

‘Populism’ is a contested concept that not necessarily conveys to the retreat of democracy but have a complex relationship with it. The recognition of something as ‘populist’, is linked to one’s political systems and ideals of democracy, which vary around the world (Arditi, 2004). Nevertheless, most of the studies on populism are based on the proposed by Cas Mudde (Mudde,

2004; Rovira Kaltwasser et al., 2017). Mudde considers populism as a set of ideas that focus on the fundamental division of the political space into two antagonistic and heterogeneous groups: 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite'. In this divided space, politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* of the people, which, to populist leaders, share the same interests and values as 'the elite' (Mudde, 2004). Mudde brings attention to the role of identity in the study of populism, and this has been noted as one of the few consistent characteristics of populist leaders: "they have an implicit or explicit claim to represent the general will of 'the people'" (Kenny, 2017; Mudde, 2017, p. 6). However, the definition 'the people' is not fixed yet. It can vary according to the different geographic and temporary spaces around the globe.

In that regard, the following is a qualitative study that explores populism in India and Indonesia by answering to the questions:

- What is the identity of 'the people' that the leaders promote?
- How is the identification between the leaders and the citizens achieved?

I apply Francisco Panizza's framework on Populism as a Mode of Identification, and Pierre Ostiguy's Socio-Cultural Approach to Populism to the analysis of Narendra Modi and Joko Widodo's public performances. These are analysed by using post-structuralist discourse analysis, and manifest content analysis. There are different reasons why exploring these cases is relevant. Firstly, there is evidence that India and Indonesia are part of a worldwide phenomenon where liberal democracy seems to be affected due to political leaders' illiberal decisions. Secondly, these topics have been mostly analysed in European or Latin American contexts (Rovira Kaltwasser et al., 2017). Thirdly, because these leaders were re-elected in May 2019 and, so far, their history in power seems to put in danger the protection of minorities and their rights.

## **2. Framing theory**

Panizza's theoretical and operational approach to populism sees it as *a mode of political identification*. This allows analysing the extent to which populism is prone to trigger a peculiar type of identification with 'the people' by fixing its definition (Kaltwasser et al., 2017). Panizza adopts elements from the poststructuralist discourse analysis (Laclau and Howarth, 2015), as well as the socio-cultural approach of Pierre Ostiguy (2017). With both, the author shows how populist identities are created, and how populist interventions shape politics (Panizza, 2017). Panizza states that political space is simplified by its symbolic division between 'the people' (as the 'plebs') and its 'other', 'the ruling elite' (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001; Mudde, 2004; Panizza, 2017). Therefore, to determine who are 'the people' and who are 'the elite', these categories have to be taken as political identities (Panizza, 2017, p. 3). From the poststructuralist tradition, Panizza takes that identities are complex, relational and incomplete. *Identities are complex*, because they 'are a set of interlocking elements', that are always reorganized in tension by the contingencies from within [at a personal level], and without [at a social level] (Panizza, 2017, p. 3). Thus, identities can be

understood as ‘...the unstable articulation of constantly changing positionalities’ in society (Laclau, 1990, p. 92).

*Identities are relational.* The construction of identities responds to the social imaginaries that normalise the social relations identity-holders are embedded in. The construction of identities respond to others’ expectations, which establishes how people fit together, how people are differentiated from each other, and what people should expect from ‘the others’ (Panizza, 2017, p. 3). *Identities are incomplete.* The necessity of identifying with something or someone occurs because there is no clear and full identity in the first place (Stavrakakis, 1999). Laclau calls this the *constitutive lack* (2001) of political identities to which identities are never fully-structured and always dislocated (Panizza, 2017). The inherent incompleteness and dislocation of the identities’ structure allows for the activation of contingent forms of subjectivity and alternative forms of identification (Panizza and Miorelli, 2013), which in the case of populism perpetuates the constantly open possibility of re-defining who are ‘the people’.

Thereby, populist leaders aim at defining ‘the people’ as a single and homogeneous identity; in doing so, they take diverse agents, ideas, practices and demands into a joint discourse that reinforces what all of them can have in common. This is a strategy based on the *politics of equivalence* in which identities are ‘...discursively constituted through *chains of equivalence* where signs are sorted and linked together in chains in opposition to other chains which thus define how the subject is, and how it is not’ (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 16). In other words, the identity of those who are ‘the people’ is performatively constructed by the articulation of meanings; linguistic and non-linguistic practices and objects brought together into a single discourse or chain of meanings<sup>3</sup> (Cerbino, 2012; Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002; Laclau and Mouffe, 2001).

However, how is it that this articulation of diverse social, political and ideological ideas triggers the identification of the people? Ostiguy’s socio-cultural approach to populism offers a methodological framework to explain how the identification between the leaders and citizens is achieved. To Ostiguy populism is characterised by a particular form of relationship between political leaders and the social basis, ‘the people’, also called ‘the low’ (Panizza, 2017). This relationship is articulated through ‘...*low* appeals<sup>4</sup> which resonate and receive positive reception from particular sectors of society for socio-cultural or historical reasons’ (Ostiguy, 2017, p. 1).

Populist leaders appeal to those who feel politically excluded (the low) by emphasising in a more subjective, identity-centred, and socially connotated way, the antagonism between ‘the people’,

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<sup>3</sup> Laclau supports this by arguing that the concept of ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’ are empty signifiers that ‘...get their meaning not from a political or ideological content, but from a particular mode of articulation of whatever social, political or ideological content...’ (2001, p. 34).

<sup>4</sup> The ‘low’ in politics is not synonymous with lower social strata. It refers to social markers emphasized in the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu (1979) to which cultural capital works as a ‘legitimate’ form of social distinction (Ostiguy, 2017).

and the political elite (Ostiguy, 2017). Leaders hold an allure for *the low* and elevate them to be recognised as holders of sovereignty. This prompts a process of identification with the plebs that ‘...is often achieved by leader’s adopting, turning upside down, and putting into public discourse socio-cultural elements that are considered as markers of inferiority by the dominant culture’(Panizza, 2017, p. 10). Ostiguy names this process ‘*the flaunting of the low*’, in which popular traits and ways of doing are articulated as identities, and as an ‘asserting’ (or flaunting) leadership.

The purpose is to create a rapport of representation, as a strategy to shorten the distance between the legitimate authority (populist leader), and the people (Ostiguy, 2017). There is no single way to ‘*flaunt*’ *the low*; populism is expressed in the whole performance of politicians<sup>5</sup>; it varies according to their praxis and expressive ‘self’. To Ostiguy, “with their performative emphasis on closeness, populists concretely perform—in an antagonistic way—a representation (‘acting’) of the representation (‘portrayal’) of the people ‘as is’.” (Ostiguy, 2017, p. 3). Hence, populism cannot be understood just as a political discourse, nor as an ideology (Ostiguy, 2017). Populism takes the form of a *political strategy* (Weyland, 2001) that itself shifts with other polarisations in the political sphere.

### **3. Methodology**

Poststructuralist and socio-cultural approaches to populism are applied to analyse Narendra Modi (PM of India) and Joko Widodo (President of Indonesia) public performances of between 2015 and 2019. To define what these leaders mean by ‘the people’, I use Laclau and Mouffe’s methodology for discourse analysis. This poststructuralist method suggests that discourse is composed of *signs* that acquire their meanings by placing them in particular relation to other signs. The fixation of meanings goes around *nodal points*, which are key signifiers that organise the articulation of *signs* with their respective meanings in *chains of equivalence* (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002).

In this study, ‘the people’ works as a *nodal point*, and by analysing the leaders’ performance, I establish the cluster of signifiers Modi and Widodo use to define who an Indian and Indonesian citizen is, and how they are. Later, I analyse how Modi and Jokowi ‘flaunt the low’ to demonstrate how the identification between the leaders and the citizens is achieved. Following Ostiguy, a populist strategy can be recognised by the features shown in Table 1.

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<sup>5</sup> It can include accents, levels of language, body language, gesture, ways of dressing, vocabulary, manners, among other actions displayed in public (Ostiguy, 2017)

Table 1 The Flaunting of The Low: Indicators. By author

Indicators	How can this be expressed in the populist performance?
<i>An 'anti-elite' rhetoric</i>	<p>Populist scripts try to connect with citizens' resentment, by directing their speech, behaviour and 'self' to the most vulnerable groups in society.</p> <p>Leaders claim to represent the people in a way the previous political elite has never done before.</p> <p>Leaders demand moral indignation caused by the prior political leaders' corruptive behaviour.</p> <p>The rhetoric states that corrupt politicians have caused poverty or vulnerability to the people.</p> <p>Populist scripts propose a rupture with the past, with the way of managing politics.</p> <p>Populists condemn previous leaders who had ignored, underrepresented, damaged or neglected the interest of the citizens.</p>
<i>Emphasis on closeness</i>	<p>By a claim to speak on behalf of the truth or reality.</p> <p>Attitudes and behaviours to listen to the people, to those who are 'on the ground'.</p> <p>Especially by arguing that since they have been on 'the low', they truly understand the feelings, necessities, and fears of the people</p> <p>The performance will follow the premise that 'I am not a politician; I am an ordinary citizen like you.'</p> <p>By public appearances in the most vulnerable areas where they 'act' as field/factory workers, where they carry people's babies, or where they perform the role of a 'common man'.</p> <p>By sharing with the people how do they do their daily activities, which, most of the time, they do by expressing a popular cultural taste through their manners, behaviour, or even the places they visit.</p>

<p><i>The authority is conceived as personalistic rather than institutional</i></p>	<p>The populist script states that the authority is personal, although it has been given to them by the people (elections).</p> <p>By a claim that the leaders can get things done irrespective of the institutionality some processes require.</p> <p>Populist picture themselves as “...the archetypal ‘superhero’ [who] works vigorously and quite flamboyantly often outside the law, ‘for the people.’” (Ostiguy and Roberts, 2017, p. 31).</p> <p>This personalist feature conceives itself as a better way of representation, rather than the more impersonal and procedural proper model of authority.</p>
<p><i>The ‘other’ is presented as a threat</i></p>	<p>Leaders claim to be ‘the voice’ of ‘the people’, thus whoever is excluded from that identity becomes a <i>nefarious minority</i>.</p> <p>The nefarious minority can be the oligarchy, the liberal elite, the colonizers, the immigrants, religious or ethnic minorities, among other social antagonists of ‘the people’.</p> <p>The script present international forces as a threat to the country’s autonomy and development. It can adopt the form of global capitalism, American imperialism, global migration, or European colonialism.</p> <p>To bring dramatism, leaders presents both (the minority and the international forces) as the cause of a potential breakdown in the country’s stability which can take the form of: an immigration crisis, economic stagnation, injustice, crime waves, among other expressions of social changes (Moffitt, 2016).</p>
<p><i>Politics are presented as accessible</i></p>	<p>Leaders’ transgressive way of doing politics is expressed in its simplicity.</p> <p>They appeal to the local population embodying specific expressions, modes and practices that can only be taken from a particular culturally-bounded repertoire.</p> <p>Leaders talk from and to the ‘heartland’, the heartland of the people (Ostiguy and Roberts, 2017, p. 31).</p>

The data under study comes from two sources: public speeches and tweets delivered by Modi and Jokowi between 2015 to 2019. I selected the National Day speeches (Table 2), because those were intended to reach the population as a whole, and because they address notions of nation and citizenship. Additionally, I included leaders' performance in Twitter; the selection of tweets is explained in Table 3.

*Table 2 Speeches Sample and Sources*

Country	Speech delivered by	Dates	Source of the Speech Transcript in English
India	PM Narendra Modi	15 <sup>th</sup> August 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018	Narendra Modi Official Webpage: "text speeches" section
Indonesia	President Joko Widodo	14 <sup>th</sup> August 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018	Sekretariat Kabinet of the Republik of Indonesia webpage: "President Speech Archives" section

I used Social Bearing to scan and select a sample of tweets based on the words Modi and Jokowi have used the most in their publications. Social Bearing is an online research tool that provides free analytics, statistics on Twitter accounts. It can retrieve information of a maximum of 3220 tweets scanned.

*Table 3 Tweets' Sample Selection*

Country	Leader	Twitter account	Tweets scanned	Most used word	Tweets selected for the analysis	Time frame
India	Narendra Modi	@narendramodi	3220	'people'	477	292 days
Indonesia	Joko Widodo	@jokowi	3220	'jkw'	875	1507 days

As shown in Table 3, the word Modi uses the most is 'people', which help to define how he pictures the citizens. In the case of Jokowi, the most used word is 'jkw', initials referring to himself.

Assuming the populist public performance as a political strategy, I analyse the data as a whole symbolic package: repertoires embodied in the message, manners or the settings of public communication between the leaders and the people (Ekström et al., 2018; Moffitt, 2016). I use manifest content analysis; a research technique for the objective and *systematic* description of the

manifest content of what the leaders have said (Bengtsson, 2016). The extracts had been compiled, revised and categorised following the indicators shown in Table 1.

#### **4. Analysis**

##### **A. The Indian people**

Along with his public performances, Modi's discursive practices coins the term 'Team India', as an equivalent meaning to 'the people' from the nation:

Team India is a big team of our one twenty-five crore [ten million] countrymen... a team of one twenty-five crore citizens working as a team together as to how they take the nation to new heights, build the nation and also protect it! So, whatever we are doing and wherever we are trying to reach, it is all because of the 'Team India' and we are grateful to this 'Team India' ().

'Team India' refers to one of Modi's first initiatives in power. In 2014, Modi manifested his idea of implementing a model of cooperative federalism in which, The Prime Minister and Chief Ministers, the Union of Council of Ministers, and the bureaucracy at the Centre and in States will work together under one team: Team India. This team, was created to take 'the country ahead', and foster the creation of, what Modi calls, a 'New India' (Mehra, 2015; Modi, 2015). As seen above, Modi constructs a chain of meanings in which Team India, his political initiative, equivalates to the nation, *to the big team of one twenty-five crore<sup>6</sup> (ten million in Indian numbering system) citizens*. Here, Modi is not only equating being an Indian citizen to be a member of Team India; he is also imprinting his signature in it. Whoever is considered part of Modi's Team India will be recognised as a member of the nation.

Modi emphasises the equivalence of the political institutions and citizens. This is a common practice in his public performance; the PM refers to 'the people' of India as members of the 'twenty-five-crores-citizens team', but also, affirms that the policies and programmes implemented under his government are a creation of Team India, as if the government decisions were an expression of the peoples' general will. On portraying who the members of Team India are, Modi states that 'the people' from India are proud. Proud of being the world's largest democracy (Modi, 2018, 2017, 2016, 2015), proud of being the sixth world's biggest economy (2018), proud of being the world's second fish producer (2018), proud of being an example of poverty reduction and health improvement recognised by international agencies such as the U.N. or WHO, The World Bank or the World Economic Forum (Modi, 2016, 2017, 2018).

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<sup>6</sup>The population of India in that year.

However, a recurrent statement among the speeches revised is that, to Modi, the people of India are proud of its sacrifice, a sacrifice that dates from the wars for independence, to the present day. Modi presents the members of Team India as warriors; people whose strength and determination are committed to building ‘...a brighter India’ (2017). However, this strength is presented as the same strength that took religious figures to success. In each of the speeches analysed, the analogies that Modi uses to refer to people's values (perseverance, wisdom, and unity) are presented as a reflection of deities from the Hinduism cosmovision, as shown:

My dear countrymen, brothers and sisters, we are the inheritors of the rich heritage of our ancient legacy of Vedas<sup>[7]</sup>. And that legacy is due to our self-confidence, and we want to carry forward the legacy [...] We want to move forward with the dream of being at the top. And that is why my dear countrymen, I want to instil a new hope, a new zeal and a new belief (in you) because the country can achieve its dreams with it... So, brothers and sisters, if we have lakhs of problems, then we also have one hundred and twenty-five crore brains, also which are all capable to solve these problems... (Modi, 2018).

Modi promises taking Team India into a country ‘...where people are not driven by the system, rather the system is driven by the people’ (2017). The PM sustains that this sovereignty would take the members of Team India to build the image of Hindustan, arguing that ‘...regardless of party’s identity, the Country’s identity holds primacy’ (Modi, 2016). Hindustan<sup>8</sup>, land of Hindus, is frequently used by Modi as an equivalent of *Mother Land India*, as the dreamt country the warriors from the past and the present are willing to build. Those who do not identify themselves as members of Hindustan, will into not be considered as part of the team; they will become ‘the other’.

### **Modi’s flaunting of the low**

#### **i. The anti-elite rhetoric**

Modi’s populist script does not manifest a clear rupture with the previous leaders. Alleging that ‘with all humility, we [his government] have given similar importance to the schemes of the previous government’ Modi invites the nation to continue with the work that the prior regimes had done; as he says, ‘government is a continuity’ (Modi, 2016). Nevertheless, Modi addresses the anti-elite rhetoric of populism in a more subtle way. Using the phrase ‘there was a time when...’, he compares his performance in government to prior governments, as it follows:

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<sup>7</sup> Oldest scriptures of Hinduism

<sup>8</sup> “‘Hindustan means land of Hindus,’ RSS General Secretary Suresh ‘Bhaiyyaji’ Joshi told Reuters, using the old Mughal Persian name for India. ‘So anyone living here is automatically a Hindu first.’” (Rupam and Frank Jack, 2015).

There was a time when the Indian economy was considered risky by experts. But now the same experts and the institutions have expressed confidence that our reform momentum has strengthened our economic fundamentals. How have things changed? [...] There was a time when the world perceived India as a country with ‘policy paralysis’ and ‘delayed reforms’... Today the world opinion about India has changed and they talk about our focus on reform, perform and transform... There was a time when the world counted India among the ‘fragile five’. They were concerned that India was pulling down the world economy but now their tone has changed as India has become a multi-trillion dollar investment destination (Modi, 2015).

Modi claims that in his government, people’s time is valued, and with the technological facilities that he provides, not only are bureaucratic procedures faster, but also it brings respect, dignity and transparency to the people (Modi, 2018, 2017, 2015). Without directly mentioning previous governments, Modi defines his role in power by distinguishing from the prior leaders. The PM political strategy in every speech is to suggest that since he has been in power, things ‘get done’ better, in less time and reach more people. Modi’s discourse adopts the anti-elite rhetoric by picturing the previous political elite as those leaders who took India to be seen as a poor country where economic stagnation and lack of hope primed.

## **ii. The emphasis on closeness**

Regarding the emphasis on closeness, India’s PM claims not only to be close to the people but to be ‘the people’. The ultimate fusion between *the high and the low* (Ostiguy and Roberts, 2017) is explicit in Modi’s public behaviour since he refers to the people as ‘brother and sisters’ who are part of the same team, not only suggesting closeness but horizontality. Modi also expresses and offers closeness to the people in very innovative ways, particularly linked to online platforms. As he mentioned:

Through [the] electronic platform mygov.in, through lacs of letters of the countrymen, through his [my] Mann Ki Baat, through dialogues with citizens, this people’s participation is on the rise day by day. About every affair of the Government we receive a number of suggestions from the far flung villages of our country and this is the real strength of our ‘Team India’ (Modi, 2015).

This is the feature of *the flaunting of the low* that Modi exploits the most. He offers several platforms for being in ‘direct’ contact with the citizens: letters or direct messages that can be sent through WhatsApp, PM personal [webpage](#), the [Government of India webpage](#), the BJP [Youtube account](#), through Modi Mobile App, among others<sup>9</sup>. Likewise, *Mann Ki Baat* [Speaking From the

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<sup>9</sup> All these means of ‘direct’ and online communication are constantly advertised as: “send a letter to the PM”.

Heart] is the name of the daily radio show where Modi shares his thoughts with citizens, and in return, Modi reads people's letters on air<sup>10</sup>.

What is innovative, is that Modi regularly asks for suggestions (e.g. what topic to address in the next discourse, input about a new policy) giving the people the feeling of being in *the high*, of finally being listened and recognised as holders of sovereignty (Modi, 2019a). On the other hand, in his twitter account, he recommends following his daily habits, such as practising yoga in the mornings or listening to certain music (Modi, 2019b). Modi also offers openness to his 'private' life, as a way to bring the people 'close' to him.

### **iii. The authority conceived as personalistic rather than institutional**

Modi claims for closeness to the people in a very self-centred way. He barely mentions the BJP in his public performances; despite this, Modi does not perform a personalistic authority. His wish to create cohesion by referring to the country as *a team* is reflected in the use of personal pronouns. In some cases, the PM uses 'we' to those who are fighting for the development of the country. In others, he uses 'we' when talking about a social programme implemented during his regime. Since he argues that he truly knows what people want, the implication is that his decisions in power are a response to people's demands.

However, the only moment when he uses 'I' is not for portraying himself as a superhero, but a martyr. Modi does not claim that it is him who is saving the country; that is a responsibility of the whole Team India. But Modi personalises the suffering. He pictures himself as a person who feels the pain of every citizen as his own, as expressed in this extract:

I am impatient as several countries have gone ahead of us, I am restless and impatient to take my country ahead of all these countries. My dear countrymen, I am worked up and I am restless because malnutrition... It remains a huge bottleneck. I am restless to rid my country of malnutrition. My countrymen, I am agitated so that a poor person can get an appropriate health cover. I am restless so that an ordinary citizen of my country can combat diseases and remain healthy. Brothers and sisters, I am restless, I am restless to ensure that our citizens can have a quality life... I am restless, I am agitated and I am also impatient for my country to lead the fourth industrial revolution... I am impatient for my country to lead it (Modi, 2018).

### **iv. The 'other' presented as a threat**

Those who are not as honourable as the members of Team India, are pictured by Modi as enemies who do not follow the beliefs of figures such as Gandhi or Buddha: corruptors, terrorists, infiltrators, communist fanatics, left-wing extremists and casteism followers. The PM refers to

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<sup>10</sup> "People's corner" is a section found in [www.narendramodi.com](http://www.narendramodi.com) where paintings, poems or videos that picture a positive image of the leader are shared.

these people as a poison which is threatening to cut the flow of ‘the nectar of development’, that is taking Team India into a world-leading economy (Modi, 2018, 2017, 2016, 2015). Even though these threats are broadly mentioned in every speech, it was not until 2016 when he clearly compares these *poisonous* features to the political opposition (Modi, 2018, 2017, 2016). The accusations mentioned the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) party coalition (Modi, 2019c), Indian National Congress Party (Modi, 2019d), or Mamata Banerjee (Modi, 2019e).

#### **v. Politics as accessible**

Finally, Modi remarks not using technocratic concepts along with his performances. On the contrary, the use of metaphors is highly frequent, however, they always refer to Hinduism deities, sacred places or stories. When speaking from the ‘heartland’, it seems that Modi expects only to be understood for those who identify themselves as members of Hindustan.

### **B. The Indonesian people**

In each of the speeches analysed, Joko Widodo starts his public performances by reciting *The Tasmiyah* as a way of greeting the audience. In Islam, The Tasmiyah is recited in Arabic to dedicate an upcoming activity to Allah: ‘*Bismillahirrahmanirrahim, Assalamu’alaikum Warahmatullahi Wabarakatuh*, [in the name of Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate]’ (Widodo, 2015, 2016, 2017a, 2018a). After reciting The Tasmiyah, Jokowi proceeds to greet the Christian, Hindu and Buddhist communities, which are the most popular religions in the country. The greetings are delivered in different languages: ‘May peace be upon us all, [in Bahasa Indonesia], *Om Swastiastu* [greeting the Hindi community in Javanese], *Namo Buddhaya the Buddhist* [greeting the Buddhist community in Bahasa Indonesia]’ (Widodo, 2015, 2016, 2017a, 2018a).

Regarding the fixation of meaning, Widodo does not propose a clear definition of ‘the people’. In some cases, the President indicates that Indonesia is an advanced nation (Widodo, 2016, 2015), in some others that as a nation still need to ‘break the chains’ of poverty, unemployment, and of the social gap. Also, along Jokowi’s speeches, he proposes a remembrance of colonial times by remarking that even though they are commemorating the anniversary of the country’s independence, there are ‘chains’ that remain to pull Indonesia down.

However, Jokowi tries to emphasise that Indonesia is a diverse country that goes beyond Java; a common practice in his performance is to mention the name of several islands. The islands he mentions are located in the farthest east and west of the archipelago: the poorest in the country. To Jokowi Indonesia is ‘a big nation that spans from Sabang [rural border with Malaysia] to Merauke [rural border with Papua New Guinea], from Miangas [rural border with the Philippines] to Rote Island [rural border with Timor East, ex-West Timor area]’ (Widodo, 2015, 2016, 2018a), as a way of reinforcing the recognition of historically conflicted frontiers.

Widodo proudly remarks that Indonesia is the ‘world’s most predominantly Muslim country’ (2015, 2016, 2017a, 2018a) and the ‘third-largest democracy in the world’; a democracy he pictures as the most ‘spectacular example [of democracy] in the world’ (2015). On rare occasions, he equates the nation of Indonesia to an advanced and technological country (2016).

It is not until 2017<sup>11</sup> when Jokowi starts using more specific lexical signs to equate to ‘the people’ and fixate its meaning. The President stated that Indonesia is a world example of a big, diverse and united Republic. He emphasises that ‘the people’ from Indonesia are courageous fighters and heroes, who have the same courage that pushed the Islamic Fighters to reach the country’s independence (Widodo, 2017a, 2018a). Finally, Jokowi points out that Indonesians are proud of their Islamic roots, proud of having the world’s champions on Qur’an memorisation competitions, and proud of being part of a country that attracts people from all over the world to learn about Islam (Widodo, 2018). Jokowi points out that Indonesians are proud of their Islamic roots, proud of having the world’s champions on Qur’an memorisation competitions, and proud of being part of a country that attracts people from all over the world to learn about Islam (Widodo, 2018).

Along his speeches, the pull-back to Indonesia’s Islamic roots is continuously presented as equivalent to the country’s original and pure roots. This brings up not only that *nativism* is relevant to define ‘the people’; this also shows how religion matters when Jokowi defines how a true Indonesian is like.

### **Jokowi’s flaunting of the low**

#### **i. The anti-elite rhetoric**

Jokowi’s performance does not target specific political ‘enemies’ or antagonistic groups. He respectfully dedicates his speeches to every one of the previous presidents, excluding Suharto, who led the Communist Purge. Nevertheless, Widodo claims for a change in the Indonesian ‘mentality’: a new mental paradigm that the people should pursue. The new paradigm is that where the government works for the people. To Jokowi the prior government elites had been favouring themselves, rather than working for the citizens’ benefits. As he mentioned in 2016:

We have to work with a new paradigm, in which the budget is focused on priority programmes. The essence is that the peoples’ money must be used for the interests of the people through concrete programmes and real actions so as to make the benefits felt by the people. Development budget, the people’s money can no longer be used up for bureaucratic operational activities such as official travels and budget for meetings that can actually be made more efficient. We also have to abandon the old tradition of using vague terms on

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<sup>11</sup> This year was marked as several religious-related events, such massive protest against Christian leaders, terrorist attacks attributed to the ISIS, and some others reported by Human Rights Organizations (Human Rights Watch, 2018).

the nomenclature of budget formulation because it will result in the inefficient use of development funds (Widodo, 2016).

Jokowi invites citizens to change their mentality, to change their behaviour. He encourages the people to move *from being consumers to producers* and in that way, to favour local commerce. Widodo pictures this ‘new paradigm’ as a way of fostering the nation’s development positioning Indonesia as a world’s leading country (2015, 2017a).

## **ii. The emphasis on closeness**

During his public performances, Jokowi refers to ‘the people’ as ‘fellow countrymen’, ‘distinguished audience’, or ‘ladies and gentlemen’, which suggest a distant but respectful approach. Differently, Jokowi refers to the Muslim population as ‘brother and sisters’, particularly alluding to the conflicts in Palestine. Widodo (2015) asks the Muslim population to resist peacefully to the injustice and colonization: ‘...Muslim brothers and sisters in the Middle East to lay down their weapons and to commit to peace for the sake of *ukhuwah Islamiyah* (Islamic brotherhood)’. The same strategy is used to refer to the population under conflict in Papua (Widodo, 2015), and to the disadvantaged people, those who remain in poverty. Jokowi states that ‘...social safety nets have been specially designed to help our disadvantaged brothers and sisters, who remain resilient and stand tall when there is economic turbulence. They need to be part of productive national development’ (Widodo, 2017a).

Jokowi attempts to demonstrate closeness to the people not necessarily through his speeches, but through his behaviour, particularly online. Jokowi’s core supporters are considered millennials, and the president’s political campaign, especially for the 2019 re-election, was marked by the constant use of social media. Widodo relates to ‘the people’ through his video blog on YouTube, and his accounts on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. In more than 90% of the tweets analysed<sup>12</sup>, Jokowi shares either videos or photos. Often by using his initials ‘Jkw’, he portrays himself visiting remote and poor places where he is in direct contact with the people. As found, on his Twitter account, he shares a video where he is carrying babies, wearing traditional aborigine outfits (Widodo, 2018b); he also shows that he uses public transport as ‘a common man’ by sharing a picture of himself on a public bus and greeting the passengers (Widodo, 2018c).

On Twitter, he also shares photos and videos of his family, showing how they have lunch together or go to the mall. Jokowi offers a two-way interaction with citizens and invites people to share their own experiences with him. Jokowi has exposed his family to the extent that he published a video where his son answers citizens’ questions about the ‘President’s private life’ (Widodo, 2019a). Additionally, when sharing his daily activities, Jokowi encourages the people to do things in the same way as he does. When he published a video of himself listening to the radio, he asked citizens to do the same (Widodo, 2017b); when posting a video of his haircut, he invited the people

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<sup>12</sup> Data provided by Social Bearing.

to get an undercut as well (Widodo, 2019b). Also, Jokowi shares recipes tutorials of ‘detox drinks’, in case citizens ‘wonder to know how he keeps in shape’ (Widodo, 2019c).

### **iii. The authority conceived as personalistic rather than institutional**

Regarding the claim for a personalistic authority, Jokowi’s performances does not express this feature of the flaunting of the low. He rarely speaks about his political decisions, and he has never portrayed himself as a ‘superhero’ whose initiatives would save the country.

### **iv. The ‘other’ presented as a threat**

Jokowi’s public performances picture the image of an ‘enemy’ in traditional ways. To the president, the enemy is a non-specific international force that is trying to take the value out of Indonesia, as the colonizers did before. Jokowi is clear in that one of those international forces is American Imperialism; the same imperialism that threatens the peace of Muslims in Palestine. Furthermore, international forces are pictured as the ones the *change of the paradigm* needs to fight: these are the ones who would jeopardize the development of the country. Related to this, Jokowi remarks on the necessity of building a strong national defence, particularly by empowering the primary weaponry defence system (*alutsista*) or by increasing the production of domestic products (Widodo, 2015).

The main threats, as he pictures them, are also the illegal fishermen who Jokowi states are putting the youth in danger by promoting the consumption of drugs (Widodo, 2016). And those threats to the country’s autonomy, that as he mentions in 2017, could be the invasion by other countries, along with radicalism, terrorism, human trafficking, drug-related crime, weapons smuggling, and cyber-crime (Widodo, 2017a). In that regard, Joko recognizes the efforts of the National Defence Forces (TNI) and the Indonesian National Police (Polri) for their arduous work in protecting the country.

### **v. Politics as accessible**

Jokowi’s way of doing politics are presented as accessible, as he said ‘actions speak louder than words’ (2016). The president, son of a carpenter from a village in Central Java, has always been proud of his roots. Even though he does not express this verbally during his speeches, he performs simplicity by wearing what any man in Indonesia can wear: a pair of black trousers, a white t-shirt and sneakers. Jokowi brags about his casual outfit, arguing that he is wearing simple clothing made in Indonesia, and that wearing sneakers shows that he is a modest and humble man. He advertises this on his Twitter account, redirecting to a link on his Vlog, as its possible to see in the his YouTube Account (*#JKWVLOG Cerita Sneakers*, 2018). Overall, Jokowi demonstrates closeness to the people follows the dynamics of a social media influencer, as a way of creating a personal branding.

## 5. Conclusions

This paper has aimed to define what is the definition of 'the people' that Modi and Widodo promote in India and Indonesia, respectively. I used Francisco Panizza's approach to populism and analysed how the political strategies of both leaders claim an exclusionary mode of identification when defining who the Indian and Indonesian people are. Along the leaders' public performance, Modi and Widodo refer to their respective countries as large and diverse nations, and both recognise diversity as an important value in the development of their nations.

However, when *fixing the meaning of 'the people'*, the chain of equivalence does not express that much diversity itself. Regarding India, Modi's strategy is to create a definition of citizenship under the name of his political initiative: Team India. A team whose strength and wisdom are linked to the roots of Hinduism; a team which *continues the dream of religious deities to convert India in a Hinduist nation*. I would argue, therefore, that Modi's definition of 'the people' is based on religious adherence, and this is an essential feature of his political strategy. By including every Hindi person in the definition of the Indian citizenship, Modi overcomes other structural divisions in the country, such as caste divisions. However, he excludes citizens from other religions such as Muslims or Christians, making them look as 'the other' who is threatening to cut the flow of 'the nectar of development'.

This recall to the religious identity of 'the people' is not as clear in the case of Indonesia. Jokowi does not define 'the people' *per se*, but he defines 'the other': those out of Indonesia's national borders. Perhaps cultural and geographical diversity difficulties Jokowi to find equivalent traits among Indonesian citizens. Referring to the territory rather than its people (by naming islands as in his speeches) can be a way to avoid tackling cultural differences when defining the 'Indonesian people'. Further understanding of these can be explored through nativism theories.

Regarding how identification with the people is achieved, there are important differences in the way how each leader *'flaunt the low'*. In India, Modi presents an actively clear anti-elite rhetoric, particularly mentioning historical enemies from the Congress Party; whereas, in Indonesia, Jokowi has no established enemy. Perhaps the fact that party coalitions are unstable in Indonesia's presidential system distorts the issue when performing anti-elite rhetoric. Jokowi seems to be more adaptable when choosing who he picks as allies, and who he defines as enemies. The *emphasis on closeness* is developed by the two leaders, particularly online. Modi claims to speak on behalf of the truth or reality, by arguing that when he listens to the people, he understands them because he is one of them. This is evident in the online platforms where he offers to receive people's input directly. In Indonesia, Jokowi claims more for identification with himself as he is a common and humble man. Both leaders reinforce the closeness to the citizens by exposing their private lives on social media. A claim for a *personalistic authority* is not highly developed in the leaders' performances; the leaders try to avoid demonstrating that their power goes beyond the power of democratic institutions. Possibly, because this is a feature of traditional populist practices that might have been already discredited.

Both leaders portray an *'other' as a threat* both (and always) highlight that the enemy is whoever threatens the country's development. In India, those who are not part of 'Team India' are considered 'the others'. This exclusion is based on religious adherence or directed to Modi's political opposition who do not pursue taking India into a Hindi nation. Jokowi portrays an enemy which is more precise than his definition of 'the people': the enemy in Indonesia is outside its borders. The enemy can take the shape of an international product, an immigrant or the foreign forces that would take control over Indonesia again. This could relate to the recent history of Indonesia. A significant difference between India and Indonesia is that after the independence from the Dutch, Indonesia had a highly chequered political history. The lack of clarity on the motives and actors involved in the 'Communist Purge', make the colonisation to look like the most recent atrocity that the whole country had suffered. It seems that at a discursive level, the independence has not settled, and the colonisers are still portrayed at Indonesia's most present enemies.

Finally, either by the use of metaphors (Modi) or by showing a casual and humble style (Jokowi), both leaders present themselves as a common man taking politics from 'the high to the low', to the people who really deserve it, the ones they are working for. Populism is a political strategy and, as it, Modi and Jokowi's public performances is mobilising citizens' feelings and fears towards the exclusion of certain minorities from the conception of citizenship. This reaffirms the necessity of furthering the study of populism in India and Indonesia as leaders' performances might be exacerbating the public discourse of intolerance embedded in the current violence against minorities. Perhaps, this will take us to reconsider India and Indonesia as the two most impressive examples of democracy in the world.

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