

Islamophobia in Social Prejudice Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to discuss the phenomenon of Islamophobia occurring worldwide, including in Indonesia, from the perspective of social prejudice theory. The results of the latest survey by the Pew Research Centre in March 2021 found Islam to be the fastest-growing religion in the world. Still, at the same time, it was stated that Muslims face more discrimination than other religious groups. This article explores the concept of Islamophobia, empirical documentation of anti-Muslim prejudice globally and in Indonesia, the theoretical foundations of social prejudice, as well as the perspectives of threat theory and social categorization theory about Islamophobia. The analysis concludes that the precursors of Islamophobia in the West likely emerge as a result of socio-cultural symbolic threats to the homogenous culture of Western societies. Historical dimensions are linked to the lingering embers of the Crusades in contemporary times. Additionally, the social identification of “us” versus “them,” openly campaigned by the United States post 9/11 attacks, implies that outgroups are not only associated with terrorist groups but also extend to the broader Arab race. In Indonesia, Islamophobia emerges from internal stereotypes present within the Muslim community, alongside discriminatory behaviors and disparaging comments originating from external entities or public figures.

Keywords— Islamophobia, Muslim, social prejudice theory, social categorization theory, threat theory

INTRODUCTION

Islam is currently recognized as the fastest-growing religion in the world, with a growth rate of 1.84%. The Muslim population is rapidly increasing worldwide and is projected to grow by 70% from 2015 to 2060. In the United States, after 22 years since the events of September 11th, the Muslim population has steadily increased to 2.35 million Muslims in 2007 and is predicted to reach 3.85 million people by 2020 [1] Despite being the fastest-growing religion, a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center in March 2021 indicates that Muslims face more “significant” discrimination than other religious groups included in the survey, including Jews and evangelical Christians [2].

In Indonesia, Islam is not only the majority religion but also the largest in the world. Data from the 2020 population census indicates that approximately 86.7% or 231 million out of a total population of 266.53 million people adhere to Islam[3]. However, the phenomenon of Islamophobia tends to persist in Indonesia. Despite the Government Official’s statement that “There is no Islamophobia in Indonesia because almost all ministers are Muslim, and Islamic culture is very much alive in the palace,” various incidents suggest the presence of Islamophobia in Indonesia.

Incidents such as the barring of a prominent ustadz (Islamic teacher) in Singapore in 2022, a statement from the Minister of Religious Affairs in 2021 comparing the call to prayer (adzan) to animal noises broadcast through loudspeakers, the ban on civil servants wearing veils and tight-fitting trousers imposed by the Minister of Religious Affairs in 2020, and the recitation of verses from the Holy Qur’an in Javanese style at the national

palace in 2015 [4] all point to the existence of Islamophobia.

The increasingly prominent phenomenon of Islamophobia in today's multicultural society needs to be understood through the lens of social prejudice theory. This understanding is essential in developing empirically-based interventions aimed at reducing the escalating anti-Muslim prejudice.

About Islamophobia

Islamophobia was initially developed as a concept in the late 1990s by political activists to draw attention to rhetoric and actions directed at Islam and Muslims in Western liberal democracies. Islamophobia was first published in 1997 in the report "Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All" by the Runnymede Trust. Since then, and especially in 2001, the term Islamophobia has been widely used by the media, citizens, and NGOs, particularly in the United Kingdom, France, and the United States [5].

The term Islamophobia began to be defined as hatred or fear of Islam, particularly Islam as a political force, hostility, or prejudice against Muslims [6]. The term Islamophobia gained more recognition following the events of 9/11 in New York City in 2001 [7]. According to Gordon (1997), the term Islamophobia was coined to refer generally to anti-Arab racism and, specifically, anti-Muslim racism. Some experts argue that Islamophobia is not a form of religious prejudice but rather cultural racism [8]. The above definition emphasizes Islamophobia as prejudice against Islam as an entity and Muslims as individuals (Muslims).

Empirical Documentation of Anti-Muslim Prejudice

To this day, the most affected by Islamophobia are the Muslim minorities living in European countries, facing challenges in political, economic, cultural, and religious aspects. Ironically, the West, which strongly advocates multiculturalism, often struggles to accept cultural differences [9]. Recent empirical documents serve as compelling evidence of provocative actions that fuel hatred against Islam. Cases like the portrayal of Prophet Muhammad in the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in France in 2006 and again in 2020 triggered anger among Muslims, with several Islamic countries condemning France as anti-Islamic [10].

In Sweden, there were instances of Quran burning by right-wing extremist and anti-Islam groups like *Stram Kurs*. These actions, led by Paludan, took place in August 2020 and recurred in April 2022. The intent behind these actions was to express Islamophobia, anti-immigrant sentiments, and anti-Turkish views [11]. In June 2021, four Muslim family members in Ontario, Canada, tragically lost their lives in a deliberate truck attack. The police investigation suggests that the 20-year-old perpetrator had a motive rooted in hatred towards Islam [12].

The most recent provocative incident occurred in the Toronto area in October 2022, characterized by vandalism in a mosque and the Imam Mahdi Islamic Center in Thornhill, death threats, and continuous harassment and violence against the Muslim community in Canada. This anti-Islamic sentiment was ignited by anti-government protests in Iran following the arrest of a woman for alleged dress code violations, resulting in her death in police custody [13].

The stigmatization of Islam may also be attributed to the frequent acts of terror carried out by groups claiming to represent Islam. The Global Terrorism Index (2022) has released data indicating that the highest number of deaths and incidents resulting from political terrorism occurred in 2018, with 73% of attacks taking place in the Western world. Meanwhile, the terrorism index in Indonesia rose from 5.28 in 2020 to in 2021, with 654 incidents recorded between 2000 and 2021. Cases of Islamophobia in Indonesia tend to be the result of tensions between different Islamic groups with varying perspectives and ideologies.

Additionally, there is a negative perception of Islam and Muslims from non-Muslim groups who may feel

threatened or offended by Islamic symbols or traditions. This stigmatization is also influenced by government actions against groups considered radical within the Muslim community

Social Prejudice Theoretical Framework

Social prejudice, according to Allport (1954), is an antipathy based on erroneous and inflexible generalizations directed toward a group as a whole or an individual solely because they are a member of that group. All groups develop distinct ways of life with characteristic codes, beliefs, standards, and “enemies” that serve their own adaptation needs, where each individual member is compelled, either subtly or overtly, to conform. There are four fundamental categories in the history of prejudice, including distant factors such as historical and sociocultural antecedents, and proximate factors such as situational antecedents and personality traits.

Baron & Byrne (2004) define social prejudice as an attitude (typically negative) toward specific group members solely based on their group membership, and it tends to evaluate group members in a similar manner. Sources of social prejudice encompass direct intergroup conflicts as competition for valuable and limited resources, social categorization with a tendency to divide the social world into two distinct categories, in-group and out-group, early learning experiences influencing attitudes through direct experiences, and various sources of social cognition, such as stereotypes, both explicit and implicit, which dictate how we think about others and use information to draw conclusions or make social judgments.

Social prejudice theory asserts that prejudice arises from the social separation of groups based on characteristics such as religion, race, or ethnicity. People tend to hold positive attitudes toward their group (in-group) and negative attitudes toward other groups (out-group), influenced by factors such as competition, threats to group identity, and social injustice [14].

The social identity theory extends the theory of social prejudice with a focus on the role of group identity in intergroup interactions. People tend to identify themselves with relevant groups, and this group identity influences intergroup behaviors, including stereotypes, prejudices, and discrimination. This theory was developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in the 1970s, based on their studies on favoritism within groups. Group identity provides a sense of self-worth and pride to its members, motivating them to defend and enhance the positive image of their group [15].

Islamophobia in Perspective Social Prejudice Theory

The theoretical perspective of Threat Theory posits that prejudice results from both realistic and symbolic threats. Realistic threats take the form of economic, political, physical, or material threats to a particular group, while symbolic threats are intangible challenges to a group’s worldview, morals, and culture [16]. Europe is socio-culturally a homogeneous society. With the growing Muslim community originating from immigrant populations, discomfort and a sense of ‘threat’ emerge. The perceived threat from the perspective of collective identity may arise due to the presence of Muslims bringing cultural, linguistic, and religious differences that are considered foreign by some majority groups. If the majority believes that the growth of the Muslim community can threaten employment opportunities, access to social resources, or the welfare system, it can trigger feelings of economic and social threat.

In reality, a significant number of immigrant groups entering Europe are lower-educated, working in lower-class occupations, and settling in specific locations, making it challenging for immigrant communities to assimilate and integrate [17]. This phenomenon leads to the conclusion that the antecedents of Islamophobia in Europe are likely more attributed to the symbolic threat perceived by European society towards the multicultural culture brought by immigrant communities, which is perceived as a threat to their cultural

homogeneity. In this regard, the way the media portrays or frames the growth of the Muslim community can play a crucial role in shaping societal perceptions. If the media tends to depict the Muslim community as a threat, it can reinforce feelings of discomfort and threat among the majority group to their homogenous culture.

In addition, the Western world also carries historical trauma from the Crusades, which occurred between 1096 and 1291 AD. Christians harbor significant animosity towards Islam due to the failure of Christians to subdue Muslims during the Crusades. The Crusades served as the foundational event shaping Europe's stance towards Islam, and the grudge from the Crusades has not subsided [18]. As a historical antecedent of hatred, the Crusades contributed to the sustained suspicion and antipathy between both groups, Christians and Muslims, despite the passage of several centuries. This phenomenon aligns with the theory of collective suffering, where the impact of suffering experienced by the in-group can extend to members of the group who did not directly experience the harm, even if they are in different geographic locations and born decades after the event [19].

In Indonesia, incidents indicating Islamophobia, from the perspective of social prejudice theory, can occur through three mechanisms. First, there is the stereotype of Muslim groups towards other Muslim groups. For example, groups considering themselves more 'traditional' in Islam tend to stigmatize Muslim groups perceived as more liberal or having different religious interpretations. Second, there is discriminative behavior through the restriction of the use of Islamic symbols. For instance, the prohibition of wearing certain attributes such as veils or tight pants. These restrictions can create inequality in religious rights and imply that Islamic symbols are considered unsuitable or unacceptable in certain environments. Third, there are speeches and comments that are perceived as demeaning to the dignity of Muslims. For example, inappropriate statements about Islamic symbols from government officials or public figures can evoke feelings of degradation or insult towards Muslims.

The second theoretical perspective is the social categorization theory of "us" versus "them." Collective suffering experiences can form a crucial part of group identity. In this context, the history of the Crusades can be considered a part of the Western identity narrative. Anti-Muslim prejudice can emerge when group identity is based on suffering experiences and historical tensions with Muslims. The perpetuation of this prejudice was primarily reignited through the events of 9/11, where there was an emphasis on patriotic solidarity gripping America, triggered by the statement of the President of the United States, George Bush. He declared, "You're either with us, or you're with the terrorists." This statement created an "us" versus "them" dichotomy where the out-group expanded beyond just terrorists, implicitly encompassing a broader category, namely individuals of Arab descent [20].

The social categorization theory suggests that people categorize themselves based on social groups, emphasizing intra-group similarities and inter-group differences. It also highlights the negative impact and attitudes when one's in-group is perceived as strong enough [21]. Thus, portraying the American in-group as a superpower to combat the out-group of terrorists can accentuate significant differences among religious and ethnic groups associated with each [22]. It is against this backdrop that stigmatization of the Arab race and negative prejudice against anything related to Arabs continue to be campaigned under the label of Islamophobia.

CONCLUSION

Islamophobia is the prejudice against Islam as an entity and Muslims as individuals (Muslims), which became more widely recognized after the 9/11 tragedy. Various empirical documentation, particularly in the West, serves as evidence of anti-Muslim prejudice, leading to discrimination against Muslims compared to other religions. The Threat Theory perspective analyzes the fear within European society when the Muslim

community shows rapid growth, potentially posing a threat to their homogenous culture. In Indonesia, the phenomenon of Islamophobia arises due to internal stereotypes within the Muslim community, as well as discriminative actions and derogatory remarks from external parties or public figures.

The perspective of collective suffering theory provides an understanding of why the West has made the history of the Crusades one of the antecedents explaining why anti-Muslim prejudice continues to persist to this day. Meanwhile, the social identity or social categorization perspective of “us” versus “them” has successfully framed the categorization of the American in-group and the out-group, which is no longer limited to terrorists but extends to individuals of Arab descent.

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