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Is the End of Time Nearing? Ramifications of Apocalyptic Beliefs in Indonesia

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SYNOPSIS

*Apocalyptic ideas, which tend to surface in times of crisis as people are forced to cope with unprecedented or disturbing events, have always been essential motivators for sociopolitical action. Understanding how ideas about the end of the world originate, circulate, and attain credibility and momentum has never been more important than now given the prevalence of catastrophic weather events and the COVID-19 pandemic. **SYED HUZAIFAH BIN OTHMAN ALKAFF** and **SABARIAH HUSSIN** examine the proliferation of apocalyptic thought in Indonesia.*

COMMENTARY

Apocalyptic narratives are common to mainstream religious traditions such as Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam, and often show up during moments of social and political turmoil as people attempt to deal with extraordinary or unsettling events.

In the last half-century, there has been much scholarly discussion about the meaning of the term "apocalyptic", with intense disagreement on many fundamental issues such as the origins of apocalyptic movements and the criteria for designating an ideology as apocalyptic.

However, what is certain is that apocalyptic movements are gaining traction, especially in recent years, following extraordinary occurrences like the COVID-19 pandemic and other significant global catastrophes.



Apocalyptic narratives have been on the rise with the recent weather catastrophes, wars and pandemics. Such views of the approaching end times, especially among the religious in Indonesia, may galvanise fear-mongering and violent manifestations in the country. *Image from Unsplash.*

Apocalyptic Islamist Movements and Recent Global Occurrences

Islamic millenarian expectations have revolved around hadiths that mention messianic and other end-of-time figures, such as Jesus, Imam al-Mahdi, Dajjal, and the tribe of Gog and Magog. Such expectations have been drawn from various natural and human-driven catastrophes, which are considered eschatological signs.

Events such as the earthquakes in Indonesia in late November 2022 and in Turkey in February 2023, which together killed thousands, as well as other natural calamities such as the COVID-19 pandemic that began in 2020 and affected more than [764 million people, leading to at least 6.9 million deaths](#), have been cited by various Islamist groups in apocalyptic contexts.

Arguments have also been made that occurrences caused by humans such as the Ukrainian war and the 2021 takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban are eschatological signs. In the case of the [Taliban](#), their restoration of Islamic law in Afghanistan is being portrayed by the apocalyptists as signs that the Taliban are the foretold army of al-Mahdi.

History has been witness to a never-ending series of natural disasters, wars and conflicts as far back as our collective memory has recorded. However, in recent years, these events have triggered a surge of interest in the idea of apocalypticism. Social media has been awash with posts indicating that such occurrences are signs of the end of time. Some netizens, quoting religious scholars, have been sharing various hadiths warning that earthquakes – among other signs – would signal the approach of the final day.

The Importance of Eschatological Ideas for Believers

David Cook, writing in *Contemporary Muslim Apocalyptic Literature*, notes that there are two elements to apocalyptic thought: time and meaning. *Time* is crucial because of the uncertainty about one's life and the consequent need to complete numerous tasks or obligations before the world ends. In the case of *meaning*, the apocalypticist looks for cosmic significance in everything, regardless of how tiny or random it is. The absolute conviction in the coming end gives the apocalypticist unparalleled energy and a sense of liberation.

The sense of liberation and energy is critical, particularly in Southeast Asian societies, where believers in such ideas are often repressed and labelled as deviants. Hence, the opportunity to just hold such thoughts gives them a sense of achievement. A [survey](#) in 2012 by the Pew Research Center indicated that 62% of Malaysians, 57% of Thais and 23% of Indonesians expect the advent of the Mahdi in their lifetimes. In real numbers, those percentages would translate into a greater number of Indonesians subscribing to apocalyptic beliefs than Muslims elsewhere in the region.

The Impact on Life in Indonesia

Among Indonesian apocalyptists, the gratification gained through social media influence appears to be a significant motivator for spreading apocalyptic beliefs. There are innumerable instances where individuals have used eschatological narratives to gain followers online and offline. A simple Internet search for end-of-time preachers shows that several of them have at least half a million subscribers and several million views each. In the offline environment, these end-of-times preachers are increasingly being invited to speak at boarding schools (*pesantrens*) and mosques, and during various religious events. Some of these offline events are recorded and uploaded on social media.

Some use such narratives to prepare their followers and students to face the end of time. One such person is a religious teacher referred to as the *kiayi* (religious scholar) of Ponpes Miftahul Falahil Muftadiin, a boarding school in Malang. The *kiayi* has prophesied that the Dajjal (deceitful messiah) will appear in 2023. He has reminded his followers to adhere to the laborious preparations that he has prescribed for facing the end of time.

Some preachers even claim to be the messiah themselves, declaring that they can influence natural calamities or tribulations. For instance, on 2 December 2022, viral news indicated that an Indonesian couple in Karawang claimed to be the Imam al-Mahdi and Ratu Adil (a messianic figure from Indonesian, specifically Javanese, folklore). The couple claimed that they could avert natural calamities or tribulations.

Some others use eschatological narratives as a way of seeking salvation, as was the case in the Surabaya incidents of 2018, when three families engaged in almost simultaneous suicide bombings that killed several others. The families were so fearful that the end of time was nearing that they felt pressed to commit an *amaliyah* (an act of good deed) for salvation.

Conclusion

Following a long period when very little attention was paid to apocalypticism, apocalyptic narratives have become widespread across Southeast Asia over the past decade, fuelled largely by extreme weather and climate events and the pandemic. The concern for policymakers is not in the beliefs themselves but in the effect that such beliefs could have. What should be of particular concern is that such beliefs can have violent manifestations, as in the Surabaya case, and that some overzealous or unscrupulous persons have been exploiting the gullibility of others for their sacrilegious agendas.

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