

Article

Civilizational Populism: Definition, Literature, Theory, and Practice

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Abstract: The purpose of this article is to clarify the concept of ‘civilizational populism’ and work towards a concise but operational definition. To do this, the article examines how populists across the world, and in a variety of different religious, geographic, and political contexts, incorporate and instrumentalize notions of ‘civilization’ into their discourses. The article observes that although a number of scholars have described a civilization turn among populists, there is currently no concrete definition of civilization populism, a concept which requires greater clarity. The article also observes that, while scholars have often found populists in Europe incorporating notions of civilization and ‘the clash of civilizations’ into the discourses, populists in non-Western environments also appear to have also incorporated notions of civilization into their discourses, yet these are rarely studied. The first part of the article begins by discussing the concept of ‘civilizationism’, a political discourse which emphasizes the civilizational aspect of social and especially national identity. Following this, the article discusses populism and describes how populism itself cannot succeed unless it adheres to a wider political programme or broader set of ideas, and without the engendering or exploiting of a ‘crisis’ which threatens ‘the people’. The article then examines the existing literature on the civilization turn evident among populists. The second part of the article builds on the previous section by discussing the relationship between civilizationism and populism worldwide. To do this, the paper examines civilizational populism in three key nations representing three of the world’s major faiths, and three different geographical regions: Turkey, India, and Myanmar. The paper makes three findings. First, while scholars have generally examined civilizational identity in European and North American right-wing populist rhetoric, we find it occurring in a wider range of geographies and religious contexts. Second, civilizationism when incorporated into populism gives content to the key signifiers: ‘the pure people’, ‘the corrupt elite’, and ‘dangerous ‘others’. In each case studied in this article, populists use a civilization based classification of peoples to draw boundaries around ‘the people’, ‘elites’ and ‘others’, and declare that ‘the people’ are ‘pure’ and ‘good’ because they belong to a civilization which is itself pure and good, and authentic insofar as they belong to the civilization which created the nation and culture which populists claim to be defending. Conversely, civilizational populists describe elites as having betrayed ‘the people’ by abandoning the religion and/or values and culture that shaped and were shaped by their civilization. Equally, civilizational populists describe religious minorities as ‘dangerous’ others who are morally bad insofar as they belong to a foreign civilization, and therefore to a different religion and/or culture with different values which are antithetical to those of ‘our’ civilization. Third, civilizational populist rhetoric is effective insofar as populists’ can, by adding a civilizational element to the vertical and horizontal dimensions of their populism, claim a civilizational crisis is occurring. Finally, based on the case studies, the paper defines civilizational populism as a group of ideas that together considers that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people, and society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’ who collaborate with the dangerous others belonging to other civilizations that are hostile and present a clear and present danger to the civilization and way of life of the pure people.

Keywords: civilizations; populism; religion; Turkey; India; Myanmar; civilizational populism

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1. Introduction

In the 21st century, across a variety of democratic political contexts, ‘civilizationism’, a political discourse that uses a largely religious classification of peoples in order to define national identity, has become a significant component of populist political rhetoric. Governing populist parties in India, Turkey, Pakistan, Hungary, Poland, and Brazil, as well as opposition and minor populist parties and individual politicians in Western Europe, Indonesia, and Australia, have achieved political and electoral success using civilizational rhetoric (Saleem 2021; Yilmaz and Morieson 2021; Yilmaz et al. 2021; Barton et al. 2021; Blackburn 2021; Kaya and Tecmen 2019). In India, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has described the state India as the modern manifestation of ancient Hindu civilization, which is today threatened by the presence of Islam and other non-Hindu groups (Saleem 2021). In Western Europe, a number of politicians have described contemporary Europe as a Christian or “Judeo-Christian and Humanist” civilization threatened by Islam (Marzouki et al. 2016; Morieson 2021). In Central and Eastern Europe, politicians in Hungary and Poland have described their nations as bastions of Christian civilization threatened by secularism, liberalism, and left-wing progressivism on one side, and Islam on the other (Ádám and Bozóki 2016; Stanley 2016). In Turkey, President Erdogan claims Turkey to be the core state of the Islamic world, and portrays the Christian West as an ever present and hostile threat to Islam and Turkey (Yilmaz 2018). In South America, Brazilian President Bolsonaro and other senior members his party claim Brazil to be part of a wider Judeo-Christian civilization, and that people of other traditions are unwelcome or threatening (Garcia 2020; Pachá 2019).

In each of these cases, and although there are international and transnational dimensions, civilizational rhetoric is used primarily in the domestic political realm, and in order to define national identity and belonging. In other words, by constructing ‘the opposition between self and other not in narrowly national but in broader civilizational terms’ (Brubaker 2017, p. 1191), predominantly right-wing—and most often though not always populist—political parties and politicians have used Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, and Christianity as tools in the service of a program in which religion helps to define national identity. This is perhaps surprising, because when we think of civilizationism in global politics, we might imagine clashing civilizations and global conflict. These civilizationalist movements often have a pernicious effect on democratic politics insofar as they create or exacerbate deep divisions within societies, and at times legitimize the repression and/or exclusion of religious and ethnic minorities, who are portrayed as threats to the nation and its religion or culture. What, then, is this largely domestic civilizationism, what is its significance in contemporary democratic global politics, and why has it become a common form of rhetoric among many of the world’s democracies?

The article makes three key arguments. First, while scholars have generally examined civilizational identity in European and North American right-wing populist rhetoric, we find it occurring in a wider range of geographies, including in Turkey, India, and Myanmar. We also find indications that radical left populists in Latin America, through the incorporation of the non-religious conception ‘Nuestramérica’ into their discourses, instrumentalize civilization based identity politics, suggesting that both right-wing and left-wing populists be incorporate civilizationism into their discourses. Second, civilizational populist rhetoric almost invariably incorporates religion. In the three nations, we examine, religion is a tool used by civilizational populists to define ‘the people’ and the outgroups (elites, religious minorities) who populists allege threaten the people’s sovereignty and ultimately their way of life. Third, civilization populist rhetoric is effective insofar as populists’ can, by adding a civilizational element to the vertical and horizontal dimensions (Taguieff 1995) of their populism, perform a civilizational crisis. This crisis is alleged by populists to be caused or permitted by ‘the elite’ and certain religious minorities defined by their supposed belonging to foreign ‘enemy’ civilizations. If this crisis is performed successfully, populists are able to convince a significant segment of the public that their way of life is threatened by ‘elites’ and religious or cultural minorities, and that radical solutions are required to ‘save’ their civilization from destruction.

2. Populism

What is populism, and why have populists in particular achieved political success in the democratic world while embracing civilizationalist rhetoric? Populism is described in a number of ways by scholars, as a set of ideas, a thin-centered populist ideology, a type of political strategy, or a discourse, or a style (Gidron and Bonikowski 2013). The most commonly accepted definition describes populism as a group of ideas that together “considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people” (Mudde 2004, p. 543). However, Mudde argues that ‘lacking the sophistication of other ideologies like socialism or liberalism’, populism—according to this approach—is a thin-centred ideology and could be combined with other beliefs and ideas of politics’ (de la Torre 2007, p. 7). This definition is satisfactory insofar as it identifies the core aspect of populism: the division of society into two categories: ‘us’ and ‘them’, and acknowledges that populism must always be blended with a ‘thick’ ideology in order to give it content. Aside from this vertical dimension, populism may contain a second horizontal cultural dimension, in which ‘the pure people’ (who are morally good) are distinguished from morally ‘bad’ and dangerous ‘others’ within society who are accused of threatening ‘the people’ and their way of life (Mudde 2017). Or as Sengul (2022, p. 3) writes, “both left and right populisms are characterized by the antagonistic pitting of “the people” vs. “the elite”, but the populist radical right is distinguished by the presence of the ‘Other’. The choice of Other is dependent on the particular historical traditions in particular national, regional and local contexts”. Populism, then, is a ‘thin’ ideology which pits a virtuous and homogeneous people against a set of elites and dangerous ‘others’ who are together depicted as depriving (or attempting to deprive) the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity and voice. Populist leaders portray themselves as saviors of ‘the people’ and defenders of their sovereignty, and protectors of the ‘good’ and ‘common’ people from their ‘corrupt’ and inauthentic enemies: elites and ‘others’ (Mudde 2017). In this way, attempts to turn politics into a Manichean and existential struggle between the forces of good and evil, represented by ‘the people’ on one hand, and ‘elites’ and ‘others’ on the other.

Equally, populism is a form of democratic politics, insofar as it sacralizes the ‘will of the people’, and places it above all other considerations, including minority rights and, at times, the rule of law. This being so, populism tends to emerge at times of perceived crisis, and when a government or ruling class fails—or is imaged to fail—to fulfil the desires of the majority, or when populists are able to manufacture a crisis (Moffitt 2015, 2016). Moreover, populism can graft itself onto a left-wing, right-wing, or eclectic agenda, and requires some larger organizing principle or generator of ideological content in order to define the characteristics of ‘the people’, their enemies, and the nature of the crisis engulfing the nation. Right-wing populism therefore refers to a wide variety of populisms, in which populist ideation is framed by a larger right-wing agenda, usually involving xenophobic attitudes and/or conservative social policies.

Populism possesses either one or two dimensions (Taguieff 1995, pp. 32–35). Much left-wing populism is socio-economic, and contains merely a vertical dimension insofar as it divides societies between ‘the people’ and ‘the corrupt elite’, or between the people at the top, and those at the bottom. In this schema ‘the people’ or the virtuous community are the working classes, who are oppressed by a small group of powerful people who illegitimately dominate the economic and political spheres (Kyle and Gultchin 2018, pp. 21–22). Right-wing populism, and forms of populism that borrow eclectically from across the political spectrum, will often contain a second horizontal dimension insofar as it divides society between ‘the people’ and ‘others’. It therefore takes the form of a cultural populism, which designates “the people” as the authentic people of the nation, and therefore others ethnic and religious minorities and—above all—‘cultural elites’. Kyle and Gultchin (2018, p. 21), for example, argue that “cultural populism tends to emphasize religious traditionalism, law and order, sovereignty” and portrays immigrants as an enemy other. Right-wing cultural

populism, moreover, contains three core features: nativism, majoritarianism, and penalism or authoritarianism (Kyle and Gultchin 2018).

Populism on its own cannot define the core characteristics of ‘the people’, the ‘corrupt elite’, and ‘others’. However, when blended with a thick ideology, set of ideas, or some other organizing principle—e.g., socialism, neoliberalism, racism, religion—populist rhetoric becomes a powerful tool of division. Right-wing populism, then, may embed the two dimensions of populism within a deeper framework based on the thick ideology to which they adhere their populist rhetoric. Indeed, in populism “the identity of both ‘the people’ and ‘the other’ are political constructs, symbolically constituted through the relation of antagonism, rather than sociological categories” (Panizza 2005, p. 3). Furthermore, “antagonism is thus a mode of identification in which the relation between its form (the people as signifier) and its content (the people as signified) is given by the very process of naming—that is, of establishing who the enemies of the people (and therefore the people itself) are” (Panizza 2005, p. 3).

3. Civilizational Populism

Civilizationism is one such framework which provides the content through which populists can distinguish between ‘the people’, ‘elites’, and ‘others’. For example, throughout Europe, populists have achieved varying degrees of political and electoral success while portraying themselves as defenders not merely of the nation, but of Western ‘Judeo-Christian’ civilization (Kaya and Tecmen 2019; Marzouki et al. 2016; Yilmaz and Morieson 2021). There is well established and growing body of literature concerning Christian identity populism in Western Europe, much of which describes how right-wing populists across the continent frame Muslim immigrants as threats to Christian or Judeo-Christian identity, culture, and civilization in Europe (Brubaker 2017; Vollard 2013; Marzouki et al. 2016; Roy 2013, 2016; Apahideanu 2014; Van Kessel 2016; Brubaker 2017; Ozzano and Bolzonar 2020). According to sociologist Rogers Brubaker (2017, p. 1193) a number of right-wing populist parties in North-Western Europe can be grouped together insofar as they perceive “opposition between self and other not in narrowly national but in broader civilizational terms”. The ‘civilizational turn’ in European populism is the product of the immigration of large numbers of Muslims to Europe, and the increasingly visible presence of Islam, which is held to be deleterious by right-wing populist parties in Europe. The growth of Islam in Europe—and perhaps the concomitant fall in non-Muslim European fertility—has led to an increasingly sense among non-Muslim Europeans that their ways of life are threatened by Muslim immigrants, who are ‘taking over’ and will soon become the majority population, but who belong to an inferior civilization (Kluvelde 2016). The presence of Muslims in Europe, according to Brubaker, has led to a curious merging of secularism and Christianity in populist rhetoric. “Just as [Muslims’] religiosity emerges from the matrix of Islam”, Brubaker argues, “so ‘our’ secularity emerges from the matrix of Christianity (or the ‘Judeo-Christian tradition’) (Brubaker 2016)”. Thus, there is little ‘religious’ about European populist civilizationism, which is, rather, a form of Christian identity politics. Moreover, despite the heavy emphasis on defending the Judeo-Christian tradition, European right-wing civilizational populism remains a hybrid form of nationalism, rather than an anti-nationalist or even transnational ideology (Brubaker 2017).

While Brubaker located civilizationism in the populism of North-Western European populist parties, Kaya and Tecmen (2019, p. 49) demonstrate that the manifestos of five European right-wing populist parties, “Alternative for Germany (AfD) in Germany, National Front (FN) in France, Party for Freedom (PVV) in the Netherlands, Five Star Movement (M5S) in Italy, and Golden Dawn (GD) in Greece), employ fear of Islam as a political instrument to mobilize their supporters and to mainstream themselves”. They also demonstrate that “right-wing populist party leaderships across Europe seem to be strongly capitalizing on civilizational matters by singling out Islam”, and in doing so increase fears that Europe’s Christian heritage and Judeo-Christian traditions are threatened existentially by Muslim immigration (Kaya and Tecmen 2019, p. 61). In Central and Eastern Europe, Poland’s ruling

Law and Justice Party (PiS) de-facto leader and co-founder, Jaroslav Kaczyński, frames Europe as a Christian-based civilization existentially threatened by left-wing and secular activists and politicians, as well as Muslim immigrants. PiS won national elections in 2016, and promised to defend Christian culture and civilization in Poland, and claimed that one of their goals was to “re-Christianize” Europe (Mazurczak 2019). Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orban similarly emphasizes the Christian nature of European ‘civilization’, which he claims to be defending from Islam, globalists, and left-wing activists (Ádám and Bozóki 2016). Thus, while Christian based civilizational populism is common across Europe, it is interesting to observe that populists in Western and particularly North-Western Europe frame Christian civilization as the progenitor of the Enlightenment and liberalism, while civilizational populists in Central and Eastern Europe often frame secularists and liberals as enemies of Christian civilization.

Outside of Europe and in the United States, Republican Party Presidential candidate Donald Trump used civilizational rhetoric during his 2016 campaign, while as Brubaker notes, Trump did not dwell strongly on civilizational politics as many European populist parties, (Brubaker 2017, p. 1207), he described the United States as a Judeo-Christian nation, and promised to protect America from Islam, which Trump claimed “hates us” (Haynes 2020). As a candidate for President Trump, like his European populist counterparts, singled out Islam as an enemy civilization, and did not claim that other religious minorities belonged to incompatible cultures. For example, speaking to a largely Hindu audience Trump exclaimed that he was a “big fan of Hindu” (sic) (Haberman 2016). These examples demonstrate how the incorporation of ideas of civilization, and the clash of civilizations, in European and American right-wing populist rhetoric are well established in scholarly literature. However, civilizational populism outside these regions is less examined, although there are many examples of the phenomenon. In contemporary Latin America, perhaps the best example of religious populism displaying civilizational undertones is that of Brazil’s authoritarian right-wing leader Jair Bolsonaro. Bolsonaro is a populist (De Sá Guimarães and De Oliveira E. Silva 2021) who has long been supported by “Brazil’s conservative religious groups, such as the Neo-Pentecostal churches and Charismatic Catholics (those who pledge formal allegiance to Rome but adopt Pentecostal-style worship practices (Knoll 2019, p. 227)”. ‘Bolsonarismo’, Feltran argues, “seeks a major shift away from modern politics”, away from “party mediation”, “law”, “pluralism” and “the constitution”, and towards “mass movement . . . male honour . . . identity . . . the gospel” (Feltran 2020). As part of this movement, he has described Brazil as belonging to Judeo-Christian civilization, language he has perhaps used to both bind Brazilians of different ethnic backgrounds together, but also to ‘other’ religious and sexual minorities (Garcia 2020; Pachá 2019).

Radical left-wing populists in Latin America may also incorporate civilizationism within their populist ideation. For example, three important Presidents of Latin American nations, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, Bolivia’s Evo Morales, and Ecuador’s Rafael Correa, “followed a dual approach of uniting among themselves in the Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América (Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America—ALBA)” and also “played active and leading roles in promoting broader continental unity” (Ellner 2012, p. 104). Having declared “themselves anticapitalist”, the three leaders “often clashed with Washington but also act in unison with moderate governments such as Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, and Paraguay” (Ellner 2012, p. 104).

Chavez, Morales, and Correa drew on “the works of the Peruvian intellectual José Carlos Mariátegui”, who “proposed an Indo-American socialism adapted to the social and political reality of the continent”, and which called “for the incorporation of indigenous and rural communities as part of the broader class and national struggle” and “recognized the interrelation between race and class in an economic system inherited from the colonial experience and the importance of creating a broad front with which to confront the forces of capital”. Inspired by these ideas, their radical left-wing populism sought to “incorporate previously marginalized peoples, including the indigenous, the Afro-descendent, peasants, women, and workers” and attempted to unite the continent in a struggle against neoliberalism.

eralism and the United States (Ellner 2012, p. 107). According to Mudde and Kaltwasser (2013), populism in Latin America has often been, in a sense, more inclusive than exclusive in nature, and sought to incorporate the marginalized into the category ‘the people’ rather than exclude them in the manner more common to right-wing European populist parties. Chavez, for example, constructed a struggle in which ‘the people’ (i.e., the working classes, indigenous people, black people, peasantry) were pitted against the neoliberal elite and the American dominated, imperialist, capitalist West (Weyland 2013; Sagarzazu and Thies 2019; Ellner 2012; de la Torre 2007). This struggle was not merely domestic. According to Mudde and Kaltwasser (2013, p. 159), “the material inclusion of the poor promoted by Chavez and Morales is directly related to an anti-imperialist rhetoric and their adherence to the ideology of Americanismo, which has its origins in the anti-colonial struggle against the Spanish Empire and defends the existence of a common regional identity between the inhabitants of Latin America”. Moreover, Chavez supported and was supported by anti-Western leaders the world over, including Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Bashar al-Assad and Muammar Qaddafi, and attempted to “undermine US influence throughout Latin America and to enlist others to create a united front to that end” (Csmonitor 2013).

The concept of ‘Nuestra América’ (our America) is particularly important in Chavez’ populist discourse. Nuestra América (often contracted to Nuestramérica) is not the product of Chavez’ imagination, but rather “has long historic roots and can be traced back to Simón Bolívar and his ideal of attaining Spanish American unity” (Wajner and Roniger 2019, p. 460). Perhaps most importantly, the term appears “in the famous essay on Nuestra América by Cuban José Martí in 1891” and “the essays *Temas de nuestra América* by Peruvian José Carlos Mariátegui in the 1920s”. In his essay ‘Nuestra América,’ “Martí engaged in historical analysis and called on the peoples of the region to unite to retain their independence and deter the emerging North American power (“the tiger out”) and rival European powers (Belnap and Fernandez 1998). Martí wanted to strengthen transnational Latin American solidarity, opposing Nuestra América to the other America, the United States,” (Wajner and Roniger 2019, p. 460). Nuestramérica is thus a call for regional unity, and posits that the peoples of the region must unite to defend themselves from the often hostile Western civilizational bloc dominated by the United States.

Wajner (2022, p. 427) argues that Chavez’ “(re-)articulation” of Latin American ‘Nuestramérica’ based transnational identity is analogous to “Orbán’s promotion of ‘Central Europeanness’, Erdoğan’s weaponisation of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, and Duterte’s identity-building in the ‘ASEAN family’”. Chávez and the political movement based on his ideology, Chavismo, may thus be understood as a form of “transnational identity politics” based on Nuestramerican unity, which has been embraced and spread primarily by Latin American radical left populist parties (Wajner and Roniger 2019, p. 458). Indeed, Chavez instrumentalized a ‘Nuestramérica’ based transnational identity to legitimize his political project in a number of ways. For example, following his election, Chavez reorganized “existing integration frameworks” within Latin America and created “new regional organizations, which adopted the vision of Nuestramerican solidarity” (Wajner and Roniger 2019, p. 469). These new organization and projects included “the ALBA Bank and the Bank of the South, the Trans-Caribbean Pipeline, and the Southern Gas Pipeline”, all of which were designed to increase regional unity and independence from the United States and the international and transnational bodies it dominated (Wajner and Roniger 2019, p. 465). A key part of Chávez ‘Nuestramérica’ based identity politics discourse was “the negative framing of the ‘Yankees’”, a theme found among many left-wing populist leaders and parties not merely in Latin America but also in Europe, such as Spain’s Podemos and Greece’s Syriza (Wajner 2022, p. 425; Sagarzazu and Thies 2019; Wajner and Roniger 2019). ‘Yankees’ were framed by Chávez as imperialists bent on dominating Latin America (Sagarzazu and Thies 2019), a framing which increased in prominence during periods in which the oil price was low and thus when the Venezuelan economy—which relies heavily on the exporting of petroleum—was weak. According to Sagarzazu and Thies (2019), Chávez’ anti-American and anti-Imperialist rhetoric during these periods was

designed to distract voters from Chávez's failed economic strategy, and to convince them that the United States was to blame for the nation's economic problems. Thus this particular framing also emphasized the need for greater Latin American unity and independence from the United States and the wider American dominated West. Furthermore, following Chávez' death in 2013, his successor "Nicolas Maduro and Nicaragua's Daniel Ortega recruited a transnational grassroots network to ensure the aesthetics of festive mass mobilisation at their rallies around Latin America, in opposition to unpopular, 'Yankee'-oriented regional frameworks", further demonstrating the importance of 'Nuestramérica' based identity politics to the radical left in the region (Wajner 2022, p. 426).

The civilizationism of the radical left populist 'pink tide' in Latin America is thus evident in the movement's instrumentalization of Nuestramérica, and the regional unity and opposition to American and Western imperialism inherent in the idea of Nuestra América'. Equally, the importance of Nuestramérica in the radical left populist discourses in Latin America shows that it is not merely right-wing populists who instrumentalize civilization based identity politics, but that radical left populists in the Global South also incorporate civilizationism within their populist discourses. Furthermore, the rise of a populist right in Latin America which seeks to position the region within Judeo-Christian civilization rather than in opposition to it, particularly in the form of Jair Bolsonaro, may be understood as a reaction to the failures of Chávez' 'Nuestramérica' based identity politics.

There is also a growing body of literature in International Relations on the impact populists are having on international politics and international bodies, some of which reveals the effects the 'civilizational turn' has on populists' foreign policy. This literature suggests that populists have a perceptible impact on international politics. In many cases, [Destradi and Plagemann \(2019\)](#), argue, "Populists centralise and personalise decision-making" and "seek to differentiate their international relations away from exclusive alliances" reinforcing "a trend towards multipolarity and the centrality of specific thick ideologies. "What emerges", they suggest, "is a fluid and less intelligible international order, not a radical reconfiguration of world politics driven by populists' 'anti-globalism'". Yet, populists use foreign policy to construct new national enemies, and through these efforts portray themselves as protecting 'the people' from foreign dangers. For example, [Löffmann \(2022, p. 411\)](#) observes that "populists across the political spectrum can use insecurity as an ideational resource to construct the 'people vs. elite' struggle as a relationship whereby the existence of the former is threatened by the latter in a variety of ways". Yet, populist governments will also use insecurity as an ideational resource to construct a 'people vs. others' struggle in which the former is threatened by the latter ([Destradi et al. 2022](#)). For populists in the Global South, foreign policy is often an important area of struggle against enemy 'others', which are sometimes defined in civilizational terms. For example, [Destradi et al. \(2022, p. 475\)](#) find that populist Turkish President "Erdoğan emphasises anti-elitism and extensively resorts to the politicisation of Turkish foreign policy by constructing foreign threats". These foreign threats constructed by Erdoğan are often presented in civilizational terms, and as attempts by 'the west' or 'western powers' to dismember Turkey and destroy Islam ([Destradi et al. 2022, p. 488](#)).

What, then, is civilizational populism? [Brubaker \(2017\)](#), [Kaya \(2021\)](#), [Kaya and Tecmen \(2019\)](#), and [Yilmaz and Morieson \(2021, 2022\)](#) have all described the civilizational turn among populists, but have not yet provided a succinct definition which clarifies the concept. Nor has the concept been explored beyond Europe and North America. We understand civilizationism to be playing a similar role to other ideas and ideologies that are adhered to populism and which give its signifiers (i.e., 'the pure people', 'corrupt elites', 'dangerous others') meaning. In other words, in the different forms of populism, thicker ideologies and ideas shape the boundaries of 'the people' 'elites' and 'others, and also provide content which describes why 'the people' are pure, authentic and good and why 'elites' and 'others' are bad and inauthentic. In populism, 'the people' are held to be morally good and pure ([Mudde 2017](#)). 'Elites', however, are perceived to be morally 'bad', because while they are of 'the people' (however defined) they have betrayed 'the

people' by either introducing an economic scheme contrary to the interests of 'the people', or permitting mass immigration which threatens the racial purity or cultural hegemony of 'the people', or for some other reason (Mudde 2017). Civilizationism is an idea which posits that the world and its peoples can be divided into several 'civilizations', most of them defined by religion. Adhered to populism, civilizationism defines self and other not primarily in national terms, but civilizational terms (Brubaker 2017). It gives content to populism's signifiers by, first, categorizing people via civilizational identity (whether self-imposed or imposed by populists). Second, by framing 'the people' as morally good because the civilization to which they belong is morally good, and derived from good religious values. Conversely, civilizationism adhered to populism allows populists to frame 'elites' as morally bad insofar as they have betrayed and abandoned the values and culture of the people's civilization. Equally, 'others' within the same society are framed as morally 'bad' because they belong to a foreign civilization with inferior values derived from an inferior religion.

Civilizationism is often an element of the 'thick' ideology to which populism is attached. For example, India's ruling BJP is deeply influenced by Hindutva, a form of Hindu Nationalism, which is not a form of Hinduism but rather a political project aimed at reviving Hindu culture and civilization (Yilmaz and Morieson 2022). Equally, civilizationism may be an element of an anti-immigrant based populist programme, such as has become common across Europe and among right-wing populist parties including the Dutch Party for Freedom, the Lega Nord, and the Alternative for Germany (Kaya and Tecmen 2019, p. 61). Of course, both populists and non-populists may use a civilizational discourse. However, this article shows, populist uses of civilizational discourses differ from non-populist discourses insofar as they use civilizationism to construct internal divisions between an ingroup who they claim belong to 'our' civilization ('the people'), and outgroups ('elites', 'others') who they claim have either betrayed the civilization of the people or belong to a threatening foreign civilization. In contrast, the civilizationalist yet non-populist Putin regime in Russia alleges that Russia is the victim of a civilizational war with the liberal-democratic West, but does not attempt to construct a 'people vs. elites' struggle within Russia based on civilizational difference (Silvius 2015; Blackburn 2021).

4. Civilizational Populism beyond the Western 'Christian' Context

4.1. Turkey

Is the civilizational turn in right-wing populism in Europe and North America reflected in the non-West? There is evidence that civilizationism is incorporated into the discourses of populist parties and leaders across a variety of parties in Muslim majority democracies and hybrid regimes. "Islamist populism" Yilmaz et al. (2021) argue, "is the embodiment of a civilizational aspect of populism within Muslim societies, and that its survival and maintenance are highly dependent on continued antagonism between Islam and its other, the Judeo-Christian West". Moreover, "Islamist civilizationists use Islam and Muslim civilizational identity to frame the vertical and horizontal divides typical of populism", (Barton et al. 2021, p. 397), which frames the struggle between 'the people' and their enemies ('elites' and 'others') as part of a broader religious struggle between righteous Muslims and those outside of/hostile towards Islam" (Barton et al. 2021, p. 397; also see Hadiz 2018; Hadiz 2016).

Perhaps the best known example of Islamist populism is associated with Turkey, and its ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the Justice and Development Party (AKP) ended several decades of Kemalist secularism and installed—over two decades—a national ideology that incorporated "Islamism, nationalism, and populism" (Taş 2020, p. 2). The AKP's new national ideology also "involved Islamist elements such as neo-Ottomanism, conservatism, and growing pious generations (Yilmaz 2018, p. 54)", but included a populist element that framed Erdoğan as "the voice of deprived 'real people' and enemy of 'elites' (Yilmaz 2018, pp. 54–55). At the same time, Erdoğan and his party portrayed certain ethnic and religious minority groups, and political opponents

of the AKP government, as threats to Islamic civilization in Turkey, and the pious and good Sunni Muslim Turkish people. To do this, Erdogan and the AKP have played on long-standing Turkish memories of the dismembering of the Ottoman Empire ('Sèvres syndrome'), and encouraged their supporters to view ethnic minorities (Armenians, Kurds) and foreign powers as enemies of Turkey who wish to dismember the country via ethnic separatism (Yilmaz and Shipoli 2022; Jung 2001). These efforts appear to be part of an effort to use foreign policy rhetoric to construct a populist struggle between 'the people' and alleged internal and external enemies.

While the AKP was elected as a pro-European Muslim democratic party, the party turned sharply authoritarian after 2013, and toward Islamism and authoritarian populism (Yilmaz 2018, 2021a, 2021b). As part of this turn, the AKP and in particular Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has increasingly drawn on Turkey's Islamic and Ottoman heritage to define national identity and belonging. Increasingly, Erdogan has attempted to position Turkey as the leading nation of Islamic civilization, and to glorify Turkey's Ottoman history and portray the West as a source of Turkey's social and economic problems. In this way, the AKP construes opposition between 'self' and the 'other' not in a narrow, national manner, but in civilizational terms, and as a battle between the Islamic and Ottoman self and the Western and Judeo-Christian other. Erdogan's civilizationism relies on the notion that Islamic civilization is superior to Western civilization—its greatest rival—but that Islam is constant under threat from the West and its inferior values. For example, in 2017 Erdogan remarked that there is a key civilizational difference between Islam and the West, and claimed that Islamic civilization is based on "help for all who need it, treating everyone, even stray animals with compassion. Western civilization directly focuses on the individual, Islamic civilization is based upon an understanding comprising each area of social life." (Hazir 2022). At other times, Erdogan has claimed the Ottoman Empire ruled with Islamic values such as "justice", "toleration", and "compassion", but that the West ruled only through violence (Hazir 2022). Unlike the West, he argued in 2014, Islamic society was peaceful and had never known racism (Hazir 2022).

Erdogan frames Turkey as the successor state of the Ottoman Empire, which shares with it the responsibility to protect Islam and Islamic civilization. For example, in 2017, Erdogan described Turkey as the "heir to a civilization which, having flourished with various cultures, has left its mark on the history of humanity." Remarketing on Turkish people's duty to perpetuate Islamic civilization, he claimed that "every vision of culture entails a vision of civilization as well, and thus one must also make efforts to build and revive the civilization while thinking over the culture". The duty to build and revive Islamic civilization was not merely his own, Erdogan said, but was also the responsibility of wider Turkish "society, the business world, NGOs, universities, people of arts and culture" (Erdoğan 2017). As part of this process of reviving Islamic civilization, Erdogan in 2022 opened a "Museum of Islamic Civilizations" in Istanbul inside a large mosque, and claimed that this museum "represent the thousand-year accumulation of Islamic civilization, which brought a brand new face to these lands" (Daily Sabah 2022).

Erdogan's civilizationism finds its way into his government's domestic and foreign policies, where it plays a role in justifying and legitimizing Erdogan's decisions. Domestically, Erdogan and the AKP legitimize their banning of opposition groups, and religious minority movements such as the Gülen Movement, by claiming that these acts are necessary defenses of Islamic civilization in Turkey. For example, following the failed coup against the AKP government in 2016, Erdogan sought to blame the coup on Gülenists, labelling the movement a terrorist organization that was perverting Islam, and portraying himself as a saviour of Islam who was protecting the pious Turkish people from destruction at the hands of their enemies (Yilmaz 2021a; Yilmaz and Albayrak 2022). Erdoğan claimed that the failed coup was a "gift from God" that had exposed "traitors" and "collaborators" with Western powers inside Turkey, who would not be eliminated by his government (Gotev 2016).

All the problems faced by Turkey and the broader Islamic world, moreover, are blamed by Erdogan on the West, which he alleges sets up “dark and evil traps” for Muslims to fall into (Yilmaz et al. 2021). According to Erdogan, “those who plan to dig pits of fire all around the Islamic world have used weapons of sedition, terrorism, and betrayal to cause brothers to hit one another. Using various plots, plans, tricks, and traps, they have targeted our existence and future survival, as well as our freedom and future. They have attempted to bring us, our noble nation, to have been the flagbearer of the Muslim ummah for hundreds of years to our knees” (Yilmaz et al. 2021). In this way, Erdogan frames the world as a place in which civilizational conflict is taking place between the innocent Muslim world and the treacherous and hostile West. Turkey—as the successor state (according to Erdogan) of the Ottoman Empire, is furthermore portrayed as the “flagbearer” of the “ummah”, and therefore the core state of Islamic civilization. Indeed, Erdogan is adamant that “the Republic of Turkey is not our first state”, but that Turkish people “are the heirs of a state that ruled over 22 million square kilometers of land on a global scale. We had a land of approximately 3 million square kilometers just before the foundation of the new Republic; shrinking from there, we are left with 780 thousand square kilometers of land” (Hazir 2022).

This neo-Ottoman based civilizationism is a key element in Turkey’s foreign policy. Erdogan has claimed that the West is always attempting to destroy the Republic of Turkey, just as it sought to destroy—and did destroy—the Ottoman Empire, saying “World War I was designed as a fight to grab and share Ottoman lands. In an era when the world order is shaken at the foundations, we will frustrate those who dream the same about the Republic of Turkey . . . We tear up those scenarios of those who want to siege our country politically, economically, militarily by realizing a much large vision . . . To those who are surprised by Turkey . . . rising again like a giant who woke up from its century old sleep, we say: ‘it is not over yet!’” (Yilmaz 2021b). These notions—whether sincerely believed or not—play an important role in justifying and legitimizing the AKP’s approach to Turkey’s foreign relations. For example, following the failed coup in 2016, Erdoğan has “re-fashioned himself as a ‘leader of the Muslim World’ and ‘the hope of the ummah’” (Yilmaz 2018), and sought to portray himself as the protector of the entire *ummah* from Western aggression. In 2019, while attending the ‘Kuala Lumpur Summit’ of Muslim nations Erdogan criticized Western dominance at the United Nations, and claimed the United Nations Security Council ignored the interests of Muslims, remarking “we [Muslims] depend on the words coming out from the mouths of the five permanent seat holders” (Povera 2019).

In a further attempt to portray Muslims worldwide as victims, Erdogan and his government portray the Israel-Palestine conflict and the conflict over Kashmir, and the persecution and murder of the Rohingya in Burma, along with incidents of anti-Muslim hate speech in the West, as attacks on the entire body of Muslims—a body ultimately led by Turkey (Yilmaz and Shakil 2021). Furthermore, Erdogan has sought to draw Turkey closer to other Muslim nations, justifying this on the basis of belonging to a shared religion and civilization. Thus the AKP led Turkish government increased cooperation with Pakistan, Azerbaijan, and Afghanistan. As Yilmaz and Shakil (2021) point out, “not only did neighbouring Turkey lend support to “fellow Muslim” Azerbaijan but also Pakistan. Moreover, the American withdrawal from Afghanistan has also seen these two partners within the *ummah* take a leading role in negotiations with the Taliban and the Afghan government” (Yilmaz and Shakil 2021). However, there appear to be limits to this civilizationism in foreign policy. For example, Erdogan has been very quiet on the oppression of Muslims in Xinjiang, perhaps due to increasingly close economic ties between Turkey and China. Erdogan’s foreign policy rhetoric is thus designed to fuel Turkish people’s insecurities, and use this “insecurity as an ideational resource to construct the ‘people vs. elite’ struggle as a relationship whereby the existence of the former is threatened by the latter in a variety of ways” (Löfflmann 2022). At the same, time, it is evident that Erdogan’s neo-Ottoman ambitions are held in check by geopolitical and domestic political realities.

Civilizationism in Turkey, then, is a key element of the AKP's populist rule, with domestic and international dimensions. It plays a key role in legitimizing the AKP's foreign policy by framing global political events as part of a clash of civilizations between the 'good' Islamic world, and the 'bad' West, and thus framing Erdogan as a pious defender of all that is good, and his enemies as representatives of 'dark forces' who possess values inferior to those of Islamic civilization. In a similar way, Erdogan also uses a civilizational discourse when legitimizing and justifying his domestic policies, and his increase authoritarianism and intolerance of dissent and political opposition. By defining Turkish national belonging in a narrow ethnoreligious manner, Erdogan is able to portray non-Sunni Muslim citizens, secularists, and all political opponents as inherent threats to the authentic and pious Turkish Sunni Muslim people of Turkey, and co-conspirators with foreign forces seeking to dismember Turkey. Finally, Erdogan's civilizational populism is inherently crisis driven, insofar as it portrays Islamic civilization as under constant attack by foreign (mostly Western) forces, and Turkey as a particular target of Western powers seeking to divide and destroy the Muslim world.

4.2. India

In 2014 the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a Hindu Nationalist political movement, won national elections and its leader, Narendra Modi, became Prime Minister of India. Modi ran a populist campaign for office in 2014 and in subsequent elections, presenting himself as a humble man of the people who would overthrow the secular elites of the ruling Congress Party, and return power to the authentic Hindu people of India, who had long been oppressed by Muslims, the British, and more recently by Congress (McDonnell and Cabrera 2019, pp. 488–90). The key intellectual influence on the party and Modi himself was the Hindutva ideology, which claims "that Hindu religious or cultural identity is the national and primary identity of Indians" (Saleem 2021).

Popularized and to a significant degree defined by Indian political activist and politician Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883–1963), Hindutva emerged as an anti-colonial, nationalist ideology in the 1920s. Hindutva is not synonymous with Hinduism. Hinduism is often classified as the third largest religion in the world, yet it significantly different from the Abrahamic monotheistic faiths insofar as the Hindu religion does not possess an obvious founder or origin, and is exceptionally plural and fluid in its practices (Jacobs 2010, pp. 6–7). Hindus will often express belief in concepts such as karma, *samsara* (the cycles of life, death, and eventually rebirth), reverence for cows, and vegetarianism, although there are many exceptions (Flood 1996, pp. 5–8). The state of India does not define 'Hinduness', but rather under the statute of personal laws Hindus are defined as people born of Hindu parents, or simply as one who does not identify as a member of another religion (e.g., Islam, Zoroastrianism, Christianity).

Hindutva, on the other hand, might be described as a political doctrine or a form of identity politics based around identification with the religion of Hinduism. Formulated most precisely in Savarkar's (2016) influential 1923 pamphlet *Essentials Of Hindutva* (Hindutva defined India as a Hindu land, and described a Hindu as a person who considers India to be their motherland (*matrbhumi*), their ancestral land (*pitrbhumi*), and their holy land (*punya bhumi*). Thus, Hindutva is not a religion, but a political movement with ethnic, cultural, and religious dimensions. Savarkar, indeed, argued that "Hinduism is only a derivative, a fraction, a part of Hindutva" (Devare 2013, pp. 195–96). Thus for Savarkar, Hindutva encompassed 'Hinduism'—or the religious aspect of Hindutva—while also encompassing the Hindu people as a race, culture, and ultimately a civilization.

Indeed, Savarkar complained that "failure to distinguish between Hindutva and Hinduism has given rise to much misunderstanding and mutual suspicion between some of those sister communities that have inherited this inestimable and common treasure of our Hindu civilization . . . It is enough to point out that Hindutva is not identical with what is vaguely indicated by the term Hinduism. By an "ism" it is generally meant a theory or a code more or less based on spiritual or religious dogma or system. However, when we

attempt to investigate into the essential significance of Hindutva, we do not primarily—and certainly not mainly—concern ourselves with any particular theocratic or religious dogma or creed . . . ’ (Savarkar 2021, Section 31).

Thus, Savarkar’s Hindutva is distinct from Hinduism, and not a moral or religious creed. Rather, according to Savarkar, “Hindus are bound together not only by the tie of the love we bear to a common fatherland and by the common blood that courses through our veins and keeps our hearts throbbing and our affections warm, but also by the tie of the common homage we pay to our great civilization—our Hindu culture” (Savarkar 2009, pp. 94–95). At the same time, there remains a deep connection between Hindutva and Hindu religious beliefs and practices. Indeed, throughout the history of the movement, Hindutva inspired activists have emphasized the importance of Hindu “spiritualists and social reformers” who used their power to encourage Hindus in India to form a “single distinct people” and fight “powerful foreign elites” (McDonnell and Cabrera 2019, pp. 485–86). Yet, Hindutva activists have also proven themselves to be pragmatic and willing to make alliance with non-Hindu movements in order to achieve political goals. Hindu Mahasabha, a political party inspired by Savarkar and Hindutva, formed a coalition with the Indian Muslim League, and refused to participate in the Civil Disobedience Movement in 1930 and the Quit India Movement (Visana 2020; Tharoor 2018, pp. 40–50; Bapu 2013, pp. 26–43; Gondhalekar and Bhattacharya 1999). Perhaps the most influential Hindutva group throughout Indian history is Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). Founded by K.B. Hedgewar in the city of Nagpur, RSS is not a political party, but a welfare and education organization which encourages “proper young Hindus” to embrace authentic “Hindu” traditions as described in the Vedic texts (Chatterji et al. 2020). RSS has a violent dimension insofar as it incorporates military training into its program, activities the group portrays as a method of creating strong and healthy youth capable of defending Hindu culture and values (Andersen and Damle 2019). Possessing perhaps six million members, RSS is a nationalist group which seeks to “remove any non-Hindu socio-religious elements from South Asia” (Yilmaz et al. 2021). For example, RSS preacher Ramapada Pal, teaches “the superiority of the Hindu kingdom”, and has claimed that “If a Muslim living in India chooses their god before India, then why should he be allowed to live in our country? This country belongs to Hindus first” (Nair 2015). Moreover, the RSS official booklet claims “Non-Hindus must be assimilated with the Hindu way of life. The words ‘Muslim’ and ‘Christian’ denote a religious phenomenon, while the word ‘Hindu’ is synonymous with the nation. Even in the United States, it is emphasized that non-Americans should be assimilated into ‘Anglo-Saxon’ culture” (Andersen and Damle 2019).

A key element in RSS ideology is the belief that the Golden Age of Hindu civilization existed many centuries prior to the present during the Vedic period, and that this civilization was brought low by foreign invaders in the form of Muslims and later British colonialism (Leidig 2016). This belief has engendered ahistorical claims that Hindu civilization possessed modern technology and knowledge lost during the period of ‘invasion’ (Thapar 2020; Jain and Lasseter 2018; Leidig 2016). RSS, despite not being a political party, has had a profound and increasing impact on Indian politics and society. Indeed, one RSS member, Narendra Modi, is today Prime Minister of India and leader of the governing BJP. In the BJP, Hindutva and populism have meshed together into a political phenomenon that has desecularized and—to a degree -de-democratized India. However, it is important to note that the BJP is not an essentially religious political party; rather, as a Hindutva inspired movement, it has a fundamentally civilizational—and thus racial, religious, and cultural—conception of India as the land of the Hindu people.

RSS members formed the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS) 1951–1977, intended to be the movement’s explicitly political wing (Carothers and O’Donohue 2020; Lahiry 2005). During Indra Gandhi’s ‘Emergency’ period the party merged with the Janata Party, forming the BJP in 1980, and over time largely disassociated itself with RSS. Under the leadership of Atal Bihari Vajpayee, twice Prime Minister of India (between 1996 and 2004), the BJP was a conservative and Hindu dominated but not yet populism oriented party (Yilmaz

et al. 2021; Nag 2015). Throughout the 2000s Vajpayee observed and at times criticized growing extremism in his party, particularly in the form of the increasing power of BJP Chief Minister of Gujarat, Narendra Modi. “I accept the Hindutva of Swami Vivekananda” Vajpayee said, “but the type of Hindutva being propagated now is wrong and one should be wary of it” (Varadarajan 2018).

By the time Modi became Prime Minister of India in 2014, the party had transformed into a Hindu Nationalist and populist movement. Modi was a controversial figure alleged to have permitted, if not encouraged, communal killings of Muslims while Chief Minister of Gujarat, and who had refused to nominate any Muslims BJP candidates during the 2012 Gujarat elections (Jaffrelot 2016; Chakraborty 2014). When campaigning for the BJP in the 2014 national elections, Modi portrayed himself as a humble man who had worked as a ‘chai wala’ (tea seller), and who was fighting corrupt Indian National Congress party elites on behalf of people like himself (Yilmaz et al. 2021; Human Rights Watch 2020; Jaffrelot and Tillin 2017, p. 184). Curiously, Modi also presented himself as a pro-business candidate, promising to implement neoliberal reforms and make India more competitive (Filkins 2019; Jaffrelot 2016). Yet, Hindutva was the key element of Modi’s 2014 campaign. For example, the BJP set up billboards across India depicting a saffron hued Modi beside text reading “I am a Patriot. I am Nationalist. I am Born Hindu” (Ghosh 2013). Modi was an RSS man and Hindutva devotee, who had as a young man visited the Vivekananda Ashram and—to use his own words—“loitered a lot in the Himalayas”, where he claims to have discovered Hindu spiritualism and “the sentiment of patriotism”, and found that the two were essentially the same thing”.

Under Modi’s leadership the BJP returned to its RSS roots, but also merged Hindutva with populism. From Hindutva Modi’s BJP drew an essentially civilizational concept of India, in which Hinduism represented the spiritual aspect of an Indian-ness which also contained racial, political, and cultural dimensions. Hindutva thus became the ‘thick’ ideology to which populism was adhered, and which gave it the content it required to become political and socially effective.

The key elements of populism were thus incorporated into an overall Hindutva based framework. For example, Modi was portrayed by the BJP as a “born Hindu” and thus an “ideal Indian” capable of defeating the corrupt elites and treacherous Muslims who stood in the way of the revival of the *hindu rashtra* (Hindu kingdom—referring to the Hindu civilization of the Vedic period) (Lefèvre 2020). Indeed, Muslims are portrayed by the BJP as invaders and cultural enemies who must be struggled against to revive Hindu culture (Jaffrelot 2021, p. 188). Or as Waikar (2018, p. 188) puts it, “by labeling Muslims as invaders—thus, fundamentally foreign to the region—Hindutva actors (1) assume the historical people and polities of South Asia to have been held together by a collective consciousness of shared Hinduness (Mahmood 1993), (2) imagine the contemporary nation-state of India as possessing an essential relationship with those polities (Sharma 2011), and thus (3) characterize contemporary Hindus as the natural “inheritors of the past and claimants to dominance in the present” because, to them, India has always been Hindu (Thapar 2014, p. 119)”.

Moreover, like other right-wing populist movements, the BJP sought to construct both vertical (people vs. elites) and horizontal divisions within society. In the case of the BJP, these divisions were defined via Hindutva. Congress party ‘elites’ were not merely corrupt, they were preventing the rejuvenation of the Hindu Kingdom. For example, former Congress leader Rahul Gandhi was called “a shahzada (princeling) of the Delhi Sultanate” by the BJP (Peker 2019, p. 32). On the other hand, the BJP presented itself as the voice of the ordinary person, with Modi as an ascetic and the working class chaiwala who became an “anointed Hindu leader” (Peker 2019, p. 32). Yet, Modi is also portrayed as a holy man “sacralised with a halo indicating Hindu symbolism of gods who glow like surya (the sun god)”, and who therefore deserves his position as “the leader” of “the people” (Peker 2019, p. 32). Equally, Muslims and other non-Hindus are portrayed by the BJP as oppressing Hindus, and preventing Hindu civilization from rising again to its

previous glory. For example, the BJP has since 2014 sought to portray itself as ‘saving’ the Hindu people from Muslim aggression through legislation such as the “abrogation of article 370” (which gave special status to Kashmir and Jammu), “the ban on cow slaughter and the construction of a Ram temple in Ayodhya”, all of which are framed by the party as necessary acts which protect Hindu culture and invalidate the Muslim “invasion” of India (Ammassari 2018, p. 8; Jain and Lasseter 2018). In a similar way, the BJP’s Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) targets displaced Bengali Muslims, and is intended to render them stateless (Amnesty International 2021; Sharma 2020). The abolition of the articles and acts might be understood as part of the Hindutva demand for *Akhand Bharat* (Greater India), or the restoration of India’s borders to those of the alleged golden age of Hindu civilization (Rashid 2020).

The BJP’s Hindutva civilizationism does not appear to possess a significant international dimension beyond outreach to the Hindu Indian diaspora. Destradi et al. (2022, pp. 484–85) found that Modi’s rhetoric largely ignores foreign policy issues, and does not often frame foreign policy issues in “populist terms”. Furthermore, unlike European right-wing populist parties, the BJP is unconcerned with immigration. Rather, they are concerned with the growth of the Muslim population of India, which they appear to consider an existential threat to Hindu cultural hegemony. As part of the party’s attempt to portray Muslims as an existential threat to Hindus and Hindu culture, inter-religious marriage is condemned as “love jihad” when the man is Muslim, and framed as an attempt by Muslims to reduce the number of Hindus in India, leading to violence against inter-religious couples (Asthana 2021; Pradhan 2020). Members of the party have also called for birth control programs in Muslim majority regions of India to reduce the number of Muslims (Quraishi 2021). There is also an international dimension to the BJP’s populist civilizationism reflected in India’s worsening relationship with Pakistan under Modi’s leadership (Pandey 2019). A key element in the BJP’s agenda is the re-education of young people, who are taught to believe the Hindutva version of India’s history. RSS’s Manmohan Vaidya, a BJP ally, claimed that “the true colour of Indian history is saffron and to bring about cultural changes we have to rewrite history” (Jain and Lasseter 2018). The BJP’s rewriting of history involves the construction of a new school syllabus that denies the “existing version of history” (Jain and Lasseter 2018) and instead tells students that modern technology was present during the Vedic period, and was in fact invented by Hindus. Indeed, Modi himself claims that Ganesh, the Hindu god with a human body and the head of an elephant, proves plastic surgery was invented by Hindus, that Vedic period Hindus also practiced forms of genetic manipulation and that the Mahabharat depicts aeroplanes, making Hindus the first people to construct flying machines (Rahman 2014).

Civilizationism incorporated into populism has proven electorally successful in India in the form of the BJP government led by Prime Minister Modi, and their combining of Hindutva and populism. Hindutva is an inherently civilizationalist ideology. It posits that Hinduism is the religion of the Hindu people, who are a racial and cultural group to whom the land of India is holy and to whom it belongs. Hindu culture and religion, and the land of India, are described together by Hindutva founder Sakarvar as Hindu civilization. Furthermore, Hindutva posits that the key task of the Hindu people is to rejuvenate the ancient Hindu Kingdom, and return the Hindu people to their former glory. When populism is combined with Hindutva, the result is a discourse that frames the Hindu people of India as the rightful owners of the nation, and in the case of the BJP’s populism discourse, Modi as the voice of the Hindu people and their protector. At the same time, the BJP’s Hindutva based populism frames secular elites and non-Hindus, especially Muslims, as foreigners who do not belong inside Hindu civilization, and who are preventing the reviving of the *hindu rashtra*. Inside this ideology, Hindu things are always associated with the ‘good’, while anything not belonging to Hindu civilization is either regarded as foreign and dangerous, or claimed to have been invented by Hindus. Hindutva based populism also encourages nostalgia among Hindus for the Vedic ‘golden age’ of Hindu civilization,

and to believe that in the BJP there is hope for a future in which the Hindu people might revive their ancient glory.

4.3. Myanmar

The relationship between Buddhism and populism is rarely studied, and yet there are concrete examples of Buddhism being instrumentalized by populist leaders in a number of majority Buddhist nations (Zúquete 2017; Htun 2020; Yilmaz et al. 2021). For example, during Myanmar's democratization period, a populist Buddhist nationalism emerged which attempted to frame successive governments as 'elites' willing to permit the Muslim minority to establish dominance over the nation, which was portrayed as the rightful possession of Buddhist people (Htun 2020; Shirley 2016). Equally, there is evidence, for example, that Buddhist nationalists in Myanmar and Sri Lanka are beginning to form a loose transnational alliance to 'safeguard' "Buddhist civilization" from its alleged Muslim enemies (Columbo Telegraph 2014). While the Buddhist-Muslim conflict in each respective nation is the product of specific historical and contemporary political events, Buddhist nationalists in Sri Lanka and Myanmar alike portray these conflicts as a 'clash of civilizations', and Muslims as a transnational threat to Buddhist culture which requires solidarity among Buddhists in order to overcome.

Myanmar is an ethnically diverse nation which has long relied upon a sense of shared religious identity and culture to bind the population together. Between 1962 and 2011 Myanmar was ruled by the military and its official ideology blended Communist central planning and social controls with Buddhist and Burmese identity politics (Egreteau and Robinne 2016; Nakanishi 2013; Aung-Thwin and Myint-U 1992). While Buddhism has long been a powerful force instrumentalized by Myanmar's political and military elite, the "use of Buddhism in both supporting and opposing political authority" is common in Myanmar (Walton 2015). Indeed, Burmese anti-colonial activists in the 1940s often used the slogan "To be Burmese means to be Buddhist!" (Artinger and Rowand 2021). Later opposition movements, such as the 1988 '8888 Uprising' and the 'Saffron Revolution' in 2007, as well as pro-military rule and anti-military movements following the 2021 military coup, saw Buddhist monks playing key roles (Artinger and Rowand 2021). According to Wills (2017), throughout the 1990s "Buddhist religious fanaticism with intense Burmese nationalism and more than a tinge of ethnic chauvinism" became increasingly mainstream in Myanmar, while as Walton (2015) argues, "the moral standing of monks comes from their detachment from worldly concerns (including politics) and a presumed lack of self-interested motivations, Buddhist monks in Myanmar have played an increasingly large role in politics over the past three decades, including during the democratic period. At the same time, Myanmar's monks have justified their political role "with reference to their vocational role as defenders and propagators of Buddhism or their obligation to reduce suffering in the world (Walton 2015). Buddhist nationalist populism emerged during the democratization period in Myanmar (2011–2021), chiefly in the form of two linked movements: the 969 movement and the Organization for the Protection of Race and Religion' /MaBaTha (MBT). The 969 movement was a group of monks and non-cloistered Buddhists who demanded a boycott of all Muslim owned businesses throughout Myanmar, and claimed to be defending Buddhist women from Muslim predators (Bookbinder 2013). The movement is alleged to have been initiated by an ex-monk named Kyaw Lwin, who was made leader in 1991 of the military government's Department for the Promotion and Propagation of the Sasana ('Sasana' means religion in the Pali language and refers to Buddhism), a body within the Religion Ministry. In 1992, the body produced a book allegedly written by Lwin called "How to live as a good Buddhist" which was republished in 2000 as "The Best Buddhist" and which featured the 969 logo on the cover, numbers with a special meaning to Buddhists¹ (Marshall 2013).

The booklet complained that minority Muslims were attempting to take over Myanmar's economy and, by having more children dominate the Buddhist population demographically (Frydenlund 2018; Moe 2017; Bookbinder 2013). Lwin's booklet "urged

Buddhists to openly display the numbers 969 on their homes, businesses and vehicles” in an effort to help Buddhists avoid Muslims and Muslim owned businesses (Moe 2017). The booklet had a powerful impact on society, and its anti-Muslim, pro-Buddhist politics message was adopted by “Buddhist Sunday Schools, volunteer groups, legal clinics, relief campaigns, donation drives, and other community oriented activities” (Thu 2021, p. 205). The public face of 969 was the Monk Ashin Wirathu. Wirathu and his group urged Buddhists to make “three cuts”: “cutting off all business ties; not allowing Buddhists to marry Muslims; and severing of all social relations with Muslims, including even casual conversations” (Moe 2017). Demands of this kind led to Wirathu being imprisoned by the military in 2003, although public pressure led to his release with other political prisoners in 2012 (Hodal 2013). After his release, and with the 969 movement banned, Wirathu formed the MBT and became the movement’s leader. MBT preached “Buddhist conspiracy theories envisioning an Islamic take-over” and described Muslims as terrorists (Artinger and Rowand 2021; Frydenlund 2018; Bookbinder 2013). Equally, MBT portrayed itself as the “protectors” of “the Buddhist identity of the country” (Fuller 2018). In 2013 Wirathu was named “The Face of Buddhist Terror” by Time Magazine, and he has since been referred to as the “Buddhist bin Laden” and a “populist demagogue” (Ellis-Petersen 2019; Safi 2018; Hodal 2013; Marshall 2013; Voice of America 2017). Wirathu’s emotive speeches call for the “promotion of the Buddhist cosmology and code of values, the maintenance of its purity and the preservation of the Buddhist Burmese state” (Biver 2014). Moreover, “The Burmese monks” in MBT “make use of a certain politicized religion that utilizes faith as the basis for the national identity, as well as the source for ultimate values and authority” (Biver 2014). Wirathu claims that Muslims “target innocent young Burmese girls and rape them” (Hodal 2013). His words appear to have encouraged Buddhists to take up arms and riot, targeting the Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine State. Unsatisfied with the results of the Rakhine State riots of 2012, which displaced 125,000 Rohingya, Wirathu in 2013 incited more anti-Muslim violence, stating “We [Buddhists] are being raped in every town, being sexually harassed in every town, being ganged up on and bullied in every town” (Hodal 2013; Human Rights Watch 2013).

Perhaps due to the respect accorded Buddhist monks in Myanmar, MBT quickly grew influential across the country in the first half of the 2010s, and at times received support from the military affiliated Union Solidary and Development Party (USDP) and Aung San Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy (NLD). Indeed, The movement’s “monks had close personal relations with numerous political parties, including the NLD; and both USDP and NLD politicians made donations to MaBaTha-affiliated monasteries”. (International Crisis Group 2017). For example, Aung San Suu Kyi’s NLD, afraid of MBT’s growing power, did not nominate Muslim candidates during the 2015 elections, which the party won, leading to “Muslim Free Parliament” (Thu 2021, p. 206). Suu Kyi’s government (2016–21) also ignored MBT hate speech against Muslims, rhetoric which arguably helped lead to the 2017 genocide of Muslim Rohingya people in Rakhine state (BBC 2018). However, MBT generally supported the pro-military USDP, on the grounds that “it is the only party that can protect the race and religion of the country” (Thu 2021, p. 207). The relationship between the two groups has sometimes proven complex, as MBT—like other populists movements—often portrays the government as out of touch elites who are unable to properly protect ‘the people’ from their enemies. For example, MBT pressure on the then USDP government led to the 2015 Race and Religion Protection Laws”, which banned interfaith marriage and religious conversion (Carroll 2015). This was a major victory for MBT, which proved it had the power to influence government to do its bidding. Indeed, MBT influence grew when the movement began campaigning to ban religious conversions and interfaith marriages. Wirathu stereotyped Muslim men in speeches as violent and murderous, and suggested that Buddhist women who marry Muslims are often killed when they do not follow Islam correctly, and claimed that Muslim violence is a threat to “world peace” (Hodal 2013). His movement also claimed that interfaith marriages ought to be banned because they ultimately increase the number of Muslims in Myanmar, and country they claim belongs to

Buddhists (Hodal 2013). Wirathu does not portray himself as an inherently violent man, but instead claims that he is forced by the cruelty of Muslims into defending the Buddhist people of Myanmar from their violence, saying “You can be full of kindness and love, but you cannot sleep next to a mad dog” (Ellis-Petersen 2019). He further justified the mass murder of Muslim Rohingya by claiming violence was necessary to root out terrorism in Rakhine state (Oppenheim 2017).

MaBaTha cannot be precisely described as a religious organization. Rather, their focus is on protecting Buddhism as a culture and identity, and preventing the growth of Islam and power of Muslims within Myanmar, as much as it is on promoting Buddhism as a faith practice. Anti-Muslim rhetoric, moreover, is a key element of its discourse. In MBT’s conception of Myanmar, the country belongs to the wider Buddhist culture of Asia, and is the modern manifestation of the ancient Buddhist civilizations that flourished in the pre-colonial period. Muslim, in this conception, have no place in Buddhist Myanmar, and represent a foreign threat to the culture and identity of the nation. In this way, MBT and the 969 movement represent Muslims as an ‘other’ which is an existential threat to the Buddhist ‘self’, and therefore must be excluded from Myanmar. At the same time, this struggle is not merely national, but civilizational, and involves a wider struggle between Buddhists and Muslims across Asia. For example, Muslim violence against Buddhists in southern Thailand, clashes between Muslims and the Buddhist Bodu Bala Sena movement in Sri Lanka, and the Taliban’s destruction of Buddhist artefacts such as the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan in 2001, appears to have caused some Buddhists in Myanmar to view their own conflict as part of a wider clash of civilizations (International Crisis Group 2017).

Furthermore, in 2014, then 969 leader Wirathu and BBS General Secretary Galagoda Atte Gnanasara signed an agreement to work together in order to “make the entire south and Southeast Asian region a peaceful region devoid of all forms of fundamentalist movements, extremisms and civil or international wars” (Columbo Telegraph 2014). “In order to achieve the said vision”, the agreement proclaims, “Both parties aim to work in collaboration and partnership for the protection, development, and betterment of Buddhists, Buddhist countries, Buddhist heritages and Buddhist civilization” (Columbo Telegraph 2014). BSB and 969 further agree to form a “Buddhist International” to work for greater networking between Buddhist groups throughout Asia, to protect Buddhist archeological sites, improve “organizational and institutional capacities”, and to “research to stabilize Buddhism” in order to “carry out researches on Buddhist philosophy and subsectors such as economic, social, educational, political derivatives of Buddhist civilization and culture” (Columbo Telegraph 2014). Commenting on the agreement, Wirathu said “today, Buddhism is in danger. We need hands to be firmly held together if we hear alarm bells ringing” (Sirilal 2014). Wirathu also declared ominously “once we [have] won this battle, we will move on to other Muslim targets” suggesting he wishes to attack Muslims beyond South Asia and South East Asia (Hodal 2013).

In 2021, having been jailed for inciting violence, Wirathu was again released by the military junta, which took power after a coup against the democratically elected NDP. Fearful of his power and influence, the military rulers of Myanmar now seek to placate Wirathu and avoid conflict with his movement. At the same time, the government of Myanmar, in yet another effort to consolidate their rule and appease Buddhist nationalists, is plans to build the largest sitting Buddha statue in the world (Al Jazeera 2022). Populist civilizationism is thus very evident in Myanmar, and closely associated with Buddhist nationalism. In the populist civilizational discourses of 969 and MBT and its successor movements, Buddhism throughout Asia is threatened by Muslims, and the government of Myanmar is not doing enough to protect Buddhists and Buddhism. Thus while primarily nationalist movements, 969 and MBT construe opposition between ‘self’ and ‘other’ not in simple national terms, but in civilizational terms, and as a battle between the Buddhist self and the Islamic other. It is important to recognise that Buddhism is not merely a religion to 969 and MBT members; rather, the ‘faith’ and ‘spiritual’ aspect is but one part of a wider Buddhist civilization which they seek to defend from alleged attacks by Muslims.

5. Conclusions

Based on these studies we make three findings about civilizational populism. First, civilizational populism is evident outside of the West, and inside the three other most widely followed religious traditions: Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Thus, civilizational populism is not merely a European or Christian based phenomenon, but a global phenomenon in which national identities are increasingly defined via civilizational belonging, and as products of religion-defined global civilizations. Equally, the importance of the non-religious conception 'Nuestramérica' in the radical left populist discourses in Latin America indicates that it is not merely right-wing populists who instrumentalize civilization based identity politics, but that left-wing populists in the Global South may also incorporate civilizationism within their populist discourses. Second, civilizationism when incorporated into populism gives content to populism's key signifiers: 'the pure people', 'the corrupt elite', and 'dangerous others'. In each case studied in this article, populists use a civilization based classification of peoples to draw boundaries around 'the people', 'elites' and 'others', and declare that 'the people' are pure, good, and authentic because they belong to a civilization which is itself pure and good, and which created the nation and culture which populists claim to be defending. Conversely, civilizational populists describe elites as having betrayed 'the people' by abandoning the religion and/or values and culture that shaped and were shaped by their civilization. Equally, civilizational populists describe religious minorities as 'dangerous' others who are morally bad insofar as they belong to a foreign civilization, and therefore to a different religion and/or culture with different values which are antithetical to those of 'our' civilization.

For example, the BJP and its underlying Hindutva philosophy conceive of Hindus as the authentic people of the land of India, and heirs to the Vedic era civilization that once flourished in the region. The BJP accuses members of the once ruling Congress party of rejecting Hindu culture and embracing secularism, and in doing so betraying the authentic Hindu people of India. At the same time, the party rejects the notion that Muslims belong to India, but instead regards them as a dangerous 'other' which seeks to dominate the nation through 'love jihad' and having large families. In Myanmar, the populist movements led by Wiranthu—969 and MaBaTha—frame Buddhists as the 'pure' and authentic people of Myanmar, and part of an ancient and widespread Buddhist civilization which is threatened by Muslims, who are portrayed as morally inferior and prone to violence, and who seek economic conquest, and government 'elites' who betray the interests of the authentic Buddhist people by refusing to take action to stop the Muslim takeover. In Turkey, President Erdogan and his AKP present Turkey as the core state of Islamic civilization, a civilization with superior values to the individualist West. Erdogan invokes conspiracy theories to explain the conflicts in many Muslim majority societies including Turkey, and claims that the West is conspiring with internal traitors to dismember Turkey and weakened Muslim power. Erdogan increasingly portrays his enemies, including Kurdish activists, secularists, Gulenists, and dissidents in journalism and academia, as not merely enemies of Turkey, but enemies of Islam itself, and therefore as morally bad actors who hate the 'good' and superior values of Islam.

Third, civilization populist rhetoric is especially effective when it involves claims that a crisis of civilization proportions is occurring, but that the populist movement has a plan to overcome the crisis and return the nation to the glory it enjoyed before the domination of 'elites' and people from 'foreign' civilizations. The AKP regime has proven adept at framing domestic and international political events as part of a global conspiracy which threatens to destroy Turkey and keep the ummah weak and divided. Wars between Muslims are thus framed by the AKP regime as 'traps' set by the West to destroy Islam, and internal political problems in Turkey also framed as part of an effort by the West to dismember and weaken Turkey, and in doing so and because Turkey is framed by Erdogan as the leader of the Islamic world, weaken the ummah. At the same time, Erdogan invokes nostalgia for the Ottoman Empire, and promises to create a 'new' Turkey which will match the glory of the Ottoman period. In India, the growing number of Muslims, and inter-faith marriages,

are portrayed as a national crisis which threatens to destroy Hindu culture. Thus, the BJP government portrays its increasingly anti-Muslim, Hindu nationalist policies as part of a necessary attempt to defend the Hindu people and their Holy lands from Muslim ‘invaders’, and restore to glory of the Vedic era Hindu Kingdom. In Myanmar, Muslim economic power and perceptions that the Muslim population is growing—naturally and due to inter-faith marriages—are portrayed as a crisis affecting Buddhists throughout Asia. At the same time, 969 and MBT portray Buddhist Civilization as superior to Islam, and are increasingly attempting to join forces with other Buddhist movements in the region to rejuvenate Buddhist civilization through research, organization, and networking.

Religion is a key element in civilizational populism, and the three civilizational populist movements we studied all incorporate religion into their discourses. Religion often provides identity of the civilizations which the populist movements we examined claim to be defending, and the movements examined patronize and are supported by organized religion, or in the case of Myanmar, themselves involved in organized religion. Religion is also, at times, used by civilizational populists to legitimize their actions and authority. However, religious faith is not the most important element in civilizational populism. Rather, religious faith is but one element of a wider religion defined civilization which populists claim to be defending. This is perhaps most clearly expressed in Hindutva, which is explicit about Hinduism the religion being but an element of Hindu culture and civilization. However, the same notion is present in Buddhist Nationalist efforts in Myanmar to join forces with Sri Lanka’s BBS to promote and defend “Buddhist Civilization” across Asia, and in Turkish President Erdogan’s claims that the values of “Islamic civilization” are superior to those of the West.

There is also a clear transnational and international element in civilizational populism evident in the case studies. This is evident in Erdogan’s neo-Ottoman agenda, in which Turkey is positioned as the leading ‘Islamic’ power, and in Wirathu’s meetings and co-authored agreements with Sri Lanka’s BBS, which form the early stages of an effort to create a ‘Buddhist International’. Civilizational populists’ engagement with international politics, however, is not leading to clashing civilizations. Rather, populists use foreign policy rhetoric to construct new enemies of ‘the people’ in a ‘people vs. elites and others’ struggle, in which the former are said to be threatened by the latter. However, this struggle is oriented toward a domestic not foreign audience, and checked by geopolitical realities and domestic political realities. For example, Erdogan’s neo-Ottoman goals are checked by other regional powers, and his concern for Muslim lives all but disappears when confronted by Chinese power. Equally, Wirathu’s attempts to construct a Buddhist International with support from Buddhist nationalists in Sri Lanka has not brought forth a powerful Buddhist bloc of nations in Asia. Moreover, Modi’s foreign policy rhetoric appears to be largely non-populist and “people-centric” (Destradi et al. 2022). Civilizational populism appears to remain a primarily nationalist phenomena, intended first and foremost to define national identity and form ingroups and outgroups based on civilizational belonging.

Based on the case studies, our definition of civilizational populism takes into account the fact that the idea of civilizationism is the essential core in this type of populism and it is used to define populism’s key signifiers in primarily civilizational terms. Thus, we define civilizational populism as a group of ideas that together considers that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people, and society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’ who collaborate with the dangerous others belonging to other civilizations that are hostile and present a clear and present danger to the civilization and way of life of the pure people.

We suggest that when combined, populism and civilizationism produce a set of loosely bound ideas that can be used to frame political events as part of a civilizational crisis which requires urgent action to prevent an otherwise inevitable calamity. The combining of civilizationism and populism, and its influence over the politics of a number of societies throughout the world, appears to have a deleterious effect on social harmony, and may at

times erode minority rights and the rule of law. We encourage scholars to begin examining how civilizationism is instrumentalized by populists politicians, political parties, and movements, and why civilizational populism has become widespread across the world in the 21st century. Finally, we call upon scholars to consider the role populism itself plays in civilizational populism. By this, we mean that it is not clear whether populism is a driving force in civilizational populism, or whether civilizationalists are using populist rhetoric to frame their cause as part of a ‘people vs. elites and others’ struggle.

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Note

- ¹ 969 is considered the cosmological opposite of 786, a number associated with Islam, a which has often appeared on Muslim owned businesses in Myanmar. See [Bookbinder \(2013\)](#).

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