
DESECULARIZATION OF ETHICS: CONFRONTING THE MORAL ISSUES OF MODERN PATRONAGE IN PURSUIT OF SUSTAINABLE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Modern patronage practices often deviate from ethical values, creating power relations fraught with vested interests and undermining the principles of social justice. This phenomenon poses a serious challenge to achieving sustainable economic development. This article examines the desecularization of ethics as a conceptual approach to restoring the role of morality and spirituality in economic practices. Using critical analysis and a philosophical approach, this article highlights the importance of internalizing values such as honesty, responsibility, and self-awareness as a foundation for formulating inclusive economic policies. Desecularization of ethics is seen as a solution to stem destructive patronage while encouraging the creation of a just and sustainable development system based on an Islamic worldview. These findings emphasize that returning to the Islamic worldview as an ethical and moral framework for economic development is not only important but also urgent in today's modern context.

Keywords: Desecularization of ethics, Modern patronage, Worldview, Modern ethics, Economy, Sustainable development, spirituality

INTRODUCTION

In essence, the practice of modern patronage injustice as a political and economic dynamic that opens up space for corruption, nepotism, and various socio-economic inequalities in today's society stems from a problem of worldview. Despite the discovery of data that concludes that the tendency of modern patronage practices is a symptom of a political system that is not yet fully mature in ensuring transparency, accountability, and distributive justice, in essence, these practices reflect human ignorance of Islamic values as well as a moral and ethical crisis as a result of colonization

and globalization of the secular Western worldview. Therefore, to correct these unjust practices cannot be done without correcting human worldview in understanding the nature of oneself as a servant, as well as the various fundamental elements that support it (Ferch, 2020). Therefore, efforts to improve are not enough to only build internal awareness to return to religion, but also encourage awareness to respond to external challenges from the West by recognizing and understanding their framework and way of thinking.

The Meaning and Purpose of Modern Patronage

Patronage is a form of reciprocal social relationship between a party with power, influence, or resources (the patron) and a party seeking support or access (the client). In the modern context, patronage is no longer limited to politics or feudal relations, but also appears in various sectors, including education, public services, and the economy. The essence of patronage is the exchange of benefits: the patron provides assistance, protection, or access to resources, while the client provides support, loyalty, or certain services. These relationships are personal, informal, and often long-term (Pamacheche et al., 2021).

The primary goal of modern patronage is to facilitate access to opportunities or resources that are difficult to access through formal channels, particularly in societies with unequal or unfair bureaucratic systems. The urgency of patronage arises when social or economic structures are unable to meet the needs of all levels of society, making patron-client relationships a practical alternative for survival and growth. In practice, patronage is necessary for the distribution of development projects, employment, business permits, and access to certain social services. If directed ethically and transparently, patronage can contribute to equal opportunities and encourage broader social engagement (Peters et al., 2020).

Immorality of Modern Patronage and Economic Obstacles

While modern patronage is ideally intended to expand access to resources and accelerate socio-economic development, on-the-ground practices often demonstrate the opposite. Patron-client relationships, which should be mutually beneficial and ethically enforced, have instead become

practices rife with moral deviations. In Indonesia, patronage practices are often abused by political and bureaucratic elites as instruments for maintaining power through the distribution of projects, positions, or social assistance to supporters. Research by the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) (2021) noted that nepotism and collusion remain high within local governments, particularly in the appointment of officials and project partners, indicating dysfunctional patronage relationships (Abou Ltaif et al., 2024).

The injustice of modern patronage is also evident in unequal access to development programs. A report by the Indonesian Institute of Sciences (LIPI) found that social assistance programs and village funds are often poorly targeted because they are controlled by local elites who prioritize their loyalist networks (Udjianto et al., 2021). When program allocations are not based on need or quality, poor communities without political connections are often marginalized. This creates a domino effect of economic inequality between regions and weakens the impetus for development at the grassroots level.

Beyond injustice, patronage also increases the opportunities for structural corruption. Indonesia Corruption Watch (ICW) in its 2023 annual report showed that the most dominant corrupt practices occur in the government procurement of goods and services, with 45% of total national corruption cases occurring in this sector—many of which involve informal relationships between project owners and local officials. Patron-client relationships in project appointments undermine the principles of transparency and healthy competition, resulting in projects often being ineffective and consuming budgets

without maximizing results (ICW, 2023).

Equally serious, immoral patronage also creates a culture of silence and reduces public participation in development oversight. A study in West Java found that people tend to be reluctant to report irregularities for fear of losing access to aid programs or labor-intensive projects (Sahin Mencutek et al., 2021). Consequently, social control over unhealthy economic practices is weakened. This situation undermines the principles of participatory democracy and alienates communities from the development process, which should be inclusive and based on the common good.

From a financial perspective, the Financial Transaction Reports and Analysis Center (PPATK) found that approximately 36.7% of total national strategic project (PSN) funds in 2023, valued at over IDR 556 trillion, flowed to state officials through irregular transactions. This reflects a massive pattern of patronage that not only disrupts development efficiency but also worsens national economic governance (Indonesia Business Post, 2024). Another emerging issue is the low level of vendor accountability in the public procurement system. According to an ICW report, in 2022, only 13.8% of vendors had their performance evaluated. This figure increased only slightly to 16.4% in 2023, out of a total of over 555,000 government tender packages. This lack of evaluation opens up opportunities for collusion between officials and service providers and reduces the quality of development outcomes (ICW, 2023).

The culture of silence among the public also poses a significant obstacle to promoting transparency. According to a 2023 report by the Open Contracting Partnership, the rejection rate for public complaints regarding government tender processes reached 78% in 2021. Although this figure decreased to 39% in 2022 thanks to intervention by civil society organizations, administrative barriers and low public literacy remain significant

challenges to effective oversight. A local study in Sorong City corroborates these findings. The Sorong City Integrity Index Survey only scored 58.20 on a scale of 0–100, well below the national average of 70.97. Meanwhile, the Sorong City Monitoring Center for Prevention (MCP) only recorded a score of 39.76. These figures indicate weak governance and the strong influence of local patronage within the local government bureaucracy (VOI, 2023).

A 2021 survey by the Central Statistics Agency (BPS) noted that although Indonesia's Anti-Corruption Behavior Index increased to 3.88 on a scale of 5, approximately 17.63% of the public still admitted to overpaying when accessing public services. Meanwhile, approximately 19.62% of business actors also admitted to doing the same. These findings indicate the continued prevalence of informal patronage practices in public services across various sectors (BPS, 2021). Overall, ICW data from 2023 revealed that 80.8% of all corruption cases in Indonesia were related to state losses, with the public procurement sector remaining the most dominant. This demonstrates that patron-client practices in informal patronage have been a major cause of weak development accountability and reduced the effectiveness of social oversight in overseeing governance.

The Roots of Modern Moral and Ethical Problems

There is no doubt that Muslims face no more serious problems than those originating from the West. The West, with its secularism and secularization, has successfully perpetuated the process of human colonization throughout the world through the concepts of modernization, development, democracy, freedom, and human rights. Furthermore, through the hegemony of the modernity project, the West seeks to deepen the myth of its superiority across various dimensions, including cultural, scientific, socio-political, and economic rules (Zhang, 2020). Therefore, researchers boldly

conclude that the roots of modern patronage immorality in the political and economic dimensions that are entrenched in Indonesian society today are the impact of the globalization of secularism and secularization as a Western modernization project. Although these actions are not entirely caused by the West, it is undeniable that Muslims' "ignorance" of Islamic values has been proven and articulated in various political and economic systems that generally still orientate towards secularism.

In essence, secularism has opened up human space to ways of thinking and living based on materialism and worldly interests. Quoting the idea of George Jacob Holyake (1850), who explained that secularism is; A system of morals and social action shaped exclusively by this-worldly considerations, irrespective of religious belief. Secularism is a code of duty relating to this life founded on purely human considerations, and intended mainly for those who find theology indefinite or inadequate, unreliable or unbelievable, its essential principles are three; (1) the improvement of this life by material means, (2) that science is the available Providence of Man, (3) that it is good to do good, whether there is other good or not.

In detail, Vazquez (2022) describes secularization as 'the deliverance of man first from religious and then from metaphysical control over his reason and his language'. Cox also outlined three dimensions of secularization, namely; disenchantment of nature, deconsecration of values, and desacralization of politics (Cox, 1995). These three dimensions were later clarified by al-Attas in his book *Islam and Secularism*. In the first dimension, intended as the removal of the charm of *tabi'i* nature (disenchantment of nature), secularism seeks to separate nature from its Creator; second dimension, the elimination of the sanctity and absoluteness of religious values from life (deconsecration of values), modern philosophy attempts to separate values

from religion, then continues with the third dimension, the elimination of the sanctity and authority of religion from politics (desacralization of politics), modern philosophy separates politics from the authority of God, so that humans do not need to be responsible to anyone but themselves (Vincent, 2023).

Al-Attas in Hammond (2022) further explains that secularism and secularization have given a negative impression and even become the cause of the proliferation of oppressive human beings. This injustice culminates in an ethical and moral crisis that has led to various disasters and major damage to the three kingdoms of nature, including animals, plants, and minerals. All of these problems stem from the problem of secularization that denies religion. As a result, humans have lost the source of absolute values and are trapped in relative values. As he explains; The fundamental truths of religion are regarded, in such a scheme of things, as mere theories, or discarded altogether as futile illusions. Absolute values are denied and relative values are affirmed; nothing can be certain, except the certainty that nothing can be certain.

Furthermore, secularization has destroyed the human identity from its nature by bringing the impression of an ontology that denies the divinity of God and affirms the divinity of humans; The logical consequence of such an attitude toward knowledge, which is determined and determined by the worldview, is to negate God and the hereafter and affirm man and his world. Man is deified and deity humanized (Ekeke et al., 2024).

This kind of relativistic logic was actually developed by Western thinkers as a framework for secularizing human ethics and morals. English thinker Thomas Singh (2023) explained that the human motive in doing something is to obtain pleasure or avoid hardship or pain. Therefore, every human action is fundamentally for self-

regard. Therefore, morality is nothing more than a subjective matter and depends on human feelings and taste. This attitude then became the main foundation for the secularization of ethics, or what al-Attas called the effort to eliminate the spiritual side and the terrestrialization of man.

Morales (2024), with his skepticism, rejected objective ethics and transformed it into a subjective one, making utility the moral principle. This idea was later developed and clarified by John Stuart Mill (1809-1873) as the theory of utilitarianism. Mill asserted that an action is considered good if it brings happiness, and bad if the opposite. Another theory that opposes utilitarianism but also developed in the West is the theory of deontology (Catell, 1972). This theory explains that human actions are the embodiment of practical reason and must be based on good desires (good will). Besides these two theories, there is another influential moral theory in the West, namely the theory of emotivism. This theory has its roots in Hume's thinking in the 18th century, but emerged in the 20th century as something new. This theory essentially attempts to reduce ethics to personal preferences (Stevenson, 1945).

All of the theories above reflect that modern ethical and moral concepts are trapped in a realm of subjectivism and individualism. No matter how many people follow and support them, in reality, each individual has different considerations, interests, and tendencies, making Western moral codes less universal and difficult for everyone to accept. Unlike modern ethical theories, good and evil in Islam are certain. In Islamic tradition, good is defined as something desired by everyone, and evil as the opposite (al-A'raf al ...ṣfahānī, 2011). There are good things in themselves (al-khayr bi al-dzāt) and good things depend on others (al-khayr bi al-'araḍ) (al-Tahānawī, 1998). This means that, in a tabi'i manner, goodness is known and identified by humans according to their nature. Thus, goodness and evil are objective, and there should be no dispute between the two.

Ultimately, the entire theory of Western moral philosophy does not reflect the characteristics of a memorable moral. A memorable moral theory should have the concept of obligation (ilzām) that originates only from God; the concept of responsibility (al-mas'ūliyyah); the concept of retribution (al-jazā'); the concept of intention and motivation (al-niyyah wa al-dawāfi') and the concept of sincerity (al-juhd) (Darrāz, 1998). Because in essence, humans cannot force themselves to submit to rules made by themselves. In the context of human relations with God, moral theory in Islam necessitates the concept of retribution. Although humans are endowed with desires (shahwat) and feelings (emotion), at the same time they are also entrusted with the responsibility to guard themselves seriously. Therefore, with all their limitations, humans as servants should fear the threats and punishment of God as a consequence of all their actions.

METHOD

In this study, the approach used is a descriptive qualitative approach with a literature review method. This research aims to explore various concepts and theories relevant to the topic under investigation, which is the importance of internalizing values in formulating inclusive economic policies. A literature review is conducted by gathering data from various sources such as scientific journals, official government publications like the Central Statistics Agency (BPS) and Bank Indonesia (BI), as well as other supporting literature related to the study.

The data collected will be analyzed using a critical analysis method, which allows the researcher to explore and critique various perspectives found in the literature. This approach is useful for assessing the relevance and contribution of values such as honesty, responsibility, and self-awareness in shaping economic policies. The critical analysis will also highlight the shortcomings and challenges in implementing inclusive economic policies, as well as how these values can be

used as the foundation for achieving them.

Additionally, a philosophical approach is applied in this study to delve deeper into the moral and ethical foundations underlying inclusive economic policies. This approach focuses on a comprehensive understanding of the values that play a role in creating a just and sustainable economic system for all segments of society. Therefore, this study not only provides a descriptive overview of existing theories but also analyzes the ethical and philosophical implications of implementing economic policies.

According to Kuncoro (2019), inclusive economic policies require an approach that considers human values, where social and moral factors play a significant role in economic decision-making processes. Meanwhile, Sari (2020) also emphasizes the importance of integrating values such as honesty and responsibility when designing policies that are equitable for all members of society.

RESULT

Desecularization and Islamization of Ethics

Since its inception, Islam has placed ethics or morals at the core of the purpose for which this religion was revealed. Prophet Muhammadﷺ (swt) may Allah be pleased with himHe was sent to perfect noble morals (al-Bukhārī, 2000), indicating that morality is not an optional or optional aspect, but rather the primary foundation and obligation of Islam. Thus, a person's religious qualities are reflected in their morals. Islam consistently links religious teachings with ethical values. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him)ﷺ (swt) may Allah be pleased with himTo be the best example in upholding noble morals, a role model for all humanity in achieving happiness in this world and the hereafter. Although morals are highly valued by all religions, true moral perfection is only fully realized in Islamic civilization.

Different from secular ethics which assumes that humans are free without the ties and responsibilities of God, Islam

emphasizes that humans were created as servants of Allah and have the responsibility to serve Him (Qs. Al-Zariyat (51); 56). The principles of human obedience to religion are *dayn* and *daynūnah*, namely human debt to their Lord (al-Attas, 1993). This means that by nature humans must choose to submit to God as their Creator. Regardless of whether humans have the right to choose between *īmān* or *inkār*, in reality they will be held accountable for their choice. Those who believe will be happy, and those who disbelieve will be miserable. Therefore, the understanding that concludes that humans are free to think and act without God's intervention is not only misguided but also goes beyond their nature. Because, human thoughts and actions cannot escape God's decree. That is the reason the concept of *taklif* in Islam seeks to control human freedom and control their desires so that they do not exceed limits (Muammar, 2024).

In the Islamic tradition, efforts to free humans from the shackles of secularism and self-tyranny have been preached by Syed M. Naquib al-Attas as what is called 'Islamization'. According to him, Islamization is;

“... the liberation of man first from magical, mythological, animistic, and national-cultural traditions (which are contrary to Islam), and then from the shackles of secularism on his mind and language... also a liberation from the control of his physical urges which tend to be secular and unfair to the essence of himself or his soul. Because man in his physical form tends to forget his true essence, becomes ignorant of his true purpose and acts unfairly towards it. Islamization is a process towards its original form which is not as strong as the process of evolution and devolution...” (al-Attas, 1993).

In fact, the Islamization referred to by al-Attas is not an instant process that can be carried out in a short period of time, but rather throughout life. In the context of the Islamization of ethics, freeing oneself from

physical urges that tend to be secular requires controlling the internal aspects of the human being. This control can only be done through spiritual development. Because ethics is a form of control over human behavior (Muammar, 2024). In this case, the scholars have outlined that human desires need to be controlled and subdued, not followed and controlled. Even though the urge of lust always pulls humans towards lower levels, with their rational soul (*al-nafs al-nātiqah*) they are required to subdue their animalistic soul (*al-nafs al-hayawāniyyah*) (al-Attas, 1993). This kind of ability to control and discipline the soul has been implemented in the Islamic tradition through the science of *Taṣawwuf*. This science offers ethics that are based on the activity of purifying the heart (*tazkiyah al-nafs*), where a person's religiousness is not measured by *dzahir* and ritual aspects but the inner aspect referred to as *taqwā* and *iḥsan*. So that in practice it emphasizes the effectiveness and essence of worship rather than external characteristics (Muammar, 2024).

Thus, it is clear that Islamic ethics has a clear picture of human nature and places the focus on the inner or human soul correctly. Meanwhile, the failure of modern secular ethics culminates in ignorance or error regarding human nature, and the main focus is limited to the material and external aspects of humans. Therefore, Islamic ethics is clearly more impressive and guarantees human happiness because it contains the following elements: (1) true faith and far from deviation and I feel; (2) emphasis on the concept of perfect humans, that humans have a dual nature, namely the body and the *ruh*; (3) a form of soul control that culminates in the qualities of *taqwā* and *iḥsan*; (4) the position of religion as a guide in life; and (5) a harmonious relationship between reason and revelation which is only possible if each is put in its place (Muammar, 2024).

All of these elements are found in the Islamic tradition and are maintained by the Ulama of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah*.

This effective Islamic ethics has been formulated by Ulama following the guidance of the Prophet *sallallahu 'alayhi wasallam* and has been a guide for Muslims for more than a thousand years. It is knowledge that is passed down from one generation to another. It is the science of *Taṣawwuf* and knowledge related to manners and good deeds recorded in the great works of Islamic civilization written by great scientists such as *Ḥasan al-Basrī*, *al-Hārith al-Muḥāsibī*, *Imām al-Ghazālī*, *Imām 'Abdullāh al-Ḥaddād* to Indonesian Ulama figures such as, *Shaikh Nur al-Dīn al-Rānirī*, *a'AbdṢamad al-Falimbānī*, *Arshad al-Banjari*, *Raja Ali Haji* who have guided Muslims to this day. (Muammar, 2024). Therefore, to free oneself from the shackles of secularism, returning to the thoughts of the Ulama and emulating them is a necessary thing.

Islamic Patronage and the Role of Sustainable Economic Development

In the modern context, patronage is understood as a relationship between a person with power or resources (patron) and a weaker or needy party (client). Unfortunately, patronage practices in many developing countries are often exploited for personal, political, or group interests. Patrons are not always accountable, and the relationship is sometimes exploitative rather than mutually reinforcing (Scott, 1972). Therefore, there is a need to explore alternative models of patronage that are more just and moral, one of which is from an Islamic perspective.

In Islamic tradition, although the term "patronage" is not used directly, similar concepts can be found through terms such as *wilayah* (protection), *kafalah* (guarantee), *wala'* (loyalty), and *imamah* (leadership). The relationship between leaders and society in Islam is not merely a power relationship, but a trust that must be accounted for before God. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said, "Each of you is a leader and will be held accountable for his leadership" (Narrated by Bukhari & Muslim). This means that the

role of the patron in Islam emphasizes the values of responsibility and service, not domination (Nasr, 2002).

The concept of patronage in Islam emphasizes justice (*al-'adl*), compassion (*rahmah*), and the public good (*maslahah 'ammah*). Leaders not only help communities but also create systems that enable them to grow and become independent. Islamic economic practices such as zakat, waqf, and baitul mal reflect forms of Islamic patronage that lead to empowerment. Recent studies have shown that optimal management of zakat and waqf significantly contributes to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly in poverty alleviation and economic development (Ma'wa et al., 2023; Al Kahfi & Zen, 2023).

In the history of Islamic civilization, the practice of fair patronage is reflected in the leadership of Umar ibn al-Khattab. He established the Baitul Mal system as a central distribution center for state wealth to the poor, orphans, and vulnerable communities. Even elderly non-Muslims received living allowances. This demonstrates that leadership in Islam does not prioritize group membership, but rather emphasizes social justice and concern for others (Asad, 1980). This system emphasizes the role of patrons not merely as providers of aid but as builders of strong and just social structures.

Today, the concept of Islamic patronage can continue to be developed through technological innovations, such as the digitalization of zakat and waqf. Sharia fintech and digital platforms enable transparency, efficiency, and the expansion of the distribution of social funds to a wider community. However, several challenges, such as digital literacy, regulation, and public participation, still need to be addressed. Recent research confirms that the digitalization of productive waqf presents a strategic opportunity to strengthen the Muslim economy in the modern era (Haliding et al., 2025; Saputri, 2024). Various Islamic social finance instruments, such as

productive zakat, agricultural waqf, *qardhul hasan*, and *infaq*, serve as tools to stimulate the Muslim economy while creating a more inclusive social system. For example, productive waqf is being used to build schools, hospitals, eco-friendly agriculture, and empower MSMEs. Recent research shows that the integration of waqf and sustainable development has begun to be implemented in several regions of Indonesia, although it still requires strengthening regulations and coordination between institutions (Masruroh et al., 2024).

By understanding Islamic values regarding social and economic relations, Islamic patronage is not just about helping, but also about building a more just, sustainable system that promotes the common good. Islam views power and leadership as a trust, not a privilege, so the relationship between patrons and society is constructive, not destructive. When these values are combined with digital technology and measurable empowerment strategies, Islamic patronage has great potential to become an alternative model for economic development that is strong, ethical, and resilient to the current global crisis.

CONCLUSION

Thus, desecularization and the Islamization of ethics are crucial steps in addressing the moral and socio-economic crisis caused by the dominance of the secular worldview. Islamic ethics serves not only as a normative guideline but also as a practical foundation for building moral, just, and welfare-oriented human behavior. Through the process of *tazkiyat al-nafs*, humans are guided to return to their natural disposition and revealed values, integrating spiritual and social dimensions. This effort emphasizes the inseparability of ethics and religiosity in public life. Therefore, the Islamization of ethics is key to creating a more just and sustainable patronage system and socio-economic order. This is a path of civilization that must be pursued

together to build a society aligned with divine values and resilient to the

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