

The Emergence of Islamist Nationalism in Indonesia

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Abstract: Identity politics have played a vital role in Indonesia's recent elections, whether in terms of alliances, the selection of candidates, campaigning and public mobilization. The intense 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election campaign gave momentum to an electoral alliance between the country's nationalists and Islamists. Incumbent president Joko Widodo, who belongs to the secular Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P), surprised many by picking an Islamic cleric, Ma'ruf Amin, for the vice-presidential post in the 2019 presidential election. The other presidential contender, Prabowo Subianto, the chairman of the nationalist Great Indonesia Movement Party (Gerindra Party), managed to gather support from several Islamist groups with a variety of traditional, moderate and liberal understandings of the religion. Thus, in these elections, both sides chose to join forces with Islamists and religious identity found a position at the center of the political debate. The wider concerns of politicians across ideological lines over the expanding economic and political roles of ethnically Chinese citizens may have made it smoother for Islamist and nationalist parties to find common ground at recent Indonesian elections.

Introduction

Indonesia is home to the largest Muslim population in the world, with more than 225 million living peacefully across the archipelago. This is a significant portion of the total Muslim population of the globe, which has reached 1.8 billion as of 2015. Indonesian society is relatively homogenous in terms of religious beliefs, with Muslims – most adhering to Sunni principles – making up 87% of the population.

Islam is deeply rooted in Indonesian society and often reflected in the public sphere. No fewer than 800,000 mosques open their doors to worshippers for regular daily prayers and students continue to attend Islamic schools and universities.¹ Religious sermons and lectures in mosques and education institutions help maintain a religious consciousness across the society. These platforms have been supplemented with social media that gives religious scholars and influencers a space to reach out to and sometimes mobilize a large audience.

Indonesia's thousands of Islamic boarding and day schools, some dating back as far as the sixteenth century, have long provided a venue for religious teachers to extend Islamic teachings to students who in turn qualify to address and preach to the public. A handful of prominent Islamic organizations also operate more than 180 universities in the country.

Islamic non-governmental organizations such as Muhammadiyah, which was founded in 1912 and has been labelled as providing a modernist interpretation of Islam, and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), a more traditional organization that represents the largest Muslim group in the country, have also come to the fore since the beginning of the twentieth century. Jemaah Tarbiyah is another such Islamist organization: inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood, it first emerged on university campuses in the 1980s through Islamic educational circles.

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The post-Suharto era witnessed a flourishing environment for political participation as legal reforms took place and space emerged for the establishment of new political parties and increased freedom of the press. No fewer than 48 political parties participated in the election of 1999, one year after the end of the Suharto era. Since then, elections have been held on a regular basis, with peaceful transitions of power witnessed a number of times. Most recently, on April 17, 2019, more than 158 million voters or about 82 percent of the electorate cast their ballot to choose the president and vice-president of the republic, as well as members of the country's local, regional and national parliaments.

Islam in Indonesian Politics

A noticeable segment of literature tends to emphasize that there are no significant ideological differences between the main Indonesian political parties. The political actors on the national scene from all backgrounds endorse the state's secular ideology of Pancasila while they participate in state politics with reference to this philosophical foundation of the state.

However, the political players can be distinguished according to their positions on the role of Islam in public affairs. According to a study conducted by Lembaga Survei Indonesia (LSI) and Australian National University (ANU), lawmakers from four Islamist parties, namely the National Awakening Party (PKB), Prosperous Justice Party (PKS), National Mandate Party (PAN) and United Development Party (PPP), have expressed the desire for a larger role for Islam in public life (see chart 1)².



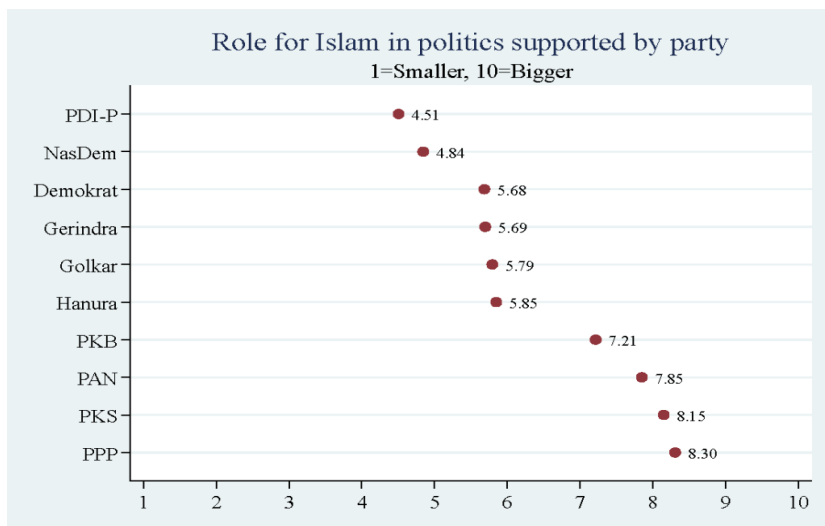


Chart 1: Role for Islam in politics supported by each party

The four Islamist parties have appeared to be in close consensus over matters such as the engagement of Islam in public affairs and economic policies but have chosen opposing sides when it comes to political alliances. Still, each party has its own identity, emerging variously from traditional, moderate, modern and liberal understandings of Islam.

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It is worth mentioning that the Indonesian government banned Hizb ut-Tahrir Indonesia in 2017, considering its activities out of line with the state’s secular ideology and a threat to national unity in a move that was linked to protests against the governor of Jakarta Basuki Tjhaja Purnama (known as Ahok). This step may also be meant to warn other Islamist groups not to step out of line.³

The following section considers the backgrounds of the four Islamist parties that passed the electoral threshold of the 2019 People’s Representatives Council (parliamentary) election⁴.

Prosperous Justice Party (PKS)

The Prosperous Justice Party is thought to be the only party of cadres in Indonesia at the present time. The party follows a strict process of the induction, training and promotion of committed members. The party endorses a moderate Islamic ideology inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood. The PKS entered the national scene in 2004, securing 45 seats in the People’s Representative Council as part of the governing coalition.

The party had the best electoral performance in its history in the most recent election, gaining 8.21 percent of the popular vote in a poll where no single party obtained even 20 percent of the electorate.

The PKS is an offshoot of the Jemaah Tarbiyah movement, a social and educational movement that has been inspired to a great extent by the Muslim Brotherhood movement. The party is known for its openness to engage on international Islamic issues rather than concentrating only on national concerns.

United Development Party (PPP)

The United Development Party formed in 1973 at the request of the state, merging four Islamist groups under one umbrella in a move to simplify the country’s party system. The PPP has been arguably dominated by nahdliyyin (NU followers) since 1999. The party recently experienced a drop of votes at the legislative level from 6.52 percent in 2014 to 4.52 percent in 2019. The result



can be partially associated with internal fractions and a split over the endorsement of presidential candidates, as the official endorsement to the incumbent president Jokowi seemed to be out of line with the image of a party that traditionally attracts Muslims with conservative attitudes.

National Mandate Party (PAN)

The National Mandate Party is an Islamist party that was established in 1998 with the support of Muhammadiyah members. The party witnessed a slight decrease in its share of votes at the parliament level from 7.59 percent in 2014 to 6.84 percent in 2019. The party, which follows a “moderate” interpretation of Islam, also displays non-traditional electoral behavior for an Indonesian Islamist party by sponsoring non-Muslim candidates in elections. In 2019, this party endorsed the presidential candidacy of Prabowo rather than Jokowi, who was endorsed by the NU.

National Awakening Party (PKB)

The National Awakening Party is a political party that was established in 1998 with strong links to the NU. The party appeals essentially to rural and common Javanese Muslims. Despite the fact that PKB has received the NU’s support, it has been unable to find a consensus on a clear party platform aside from the leaders’ tendencies.

The PKB maintained its vote shares in the recent election of the People’s Representative Council, obtaining 9.69 percent of the total vote in 2019, more than the 9.04 percent that it secured in 2014.

Indonesian People's Representative Council: 2014 vs 2019
Percentage of votes for Islamist parties

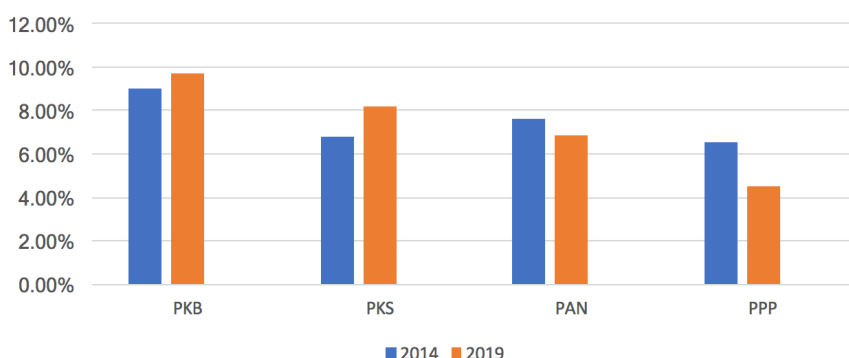


Chart 2: Votes for Islamist parties at Indonesian People’s Representative Council elections

Identity Politics

Identity politics can be seen in and linked to many recent political events in Indonesia. However, the religious element in the debate of identity in this context is quite different from many other international cases, where topics such as gender, race and class dominate the debate.

The subject of Islam has been arguably placed in the center of the Indonesian political narrative in recent years, in line with solid Islamic foundations in society at large. The 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election brought the Islam factor to the fore as former Jakarta governor Ahok was accused of insulting the Qur’an. This came after a short video of him questioning an interpretation of a Qur’anic verse (Alma’idah, 51) that Muslims cannot be governed by non-Muslims (like him, an ethnic Chinese Christian) during which he

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claimed that such an interpretation was a lie.⁵ Jakarta later witnessed a number of large street protests calling for the prosecution of Ahok on blasphemy grounds. Those street protests mobilized hundreds of thousands of people, and independent media reported that these rallies were among the largest, if not the largest, protests in Indonesia's history.

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Furthermore, all Islamist parties from both sides of the political divide, together with the nationalist Gerindra party and the centrist Democratic party, formed an electoral alliance to prevent Ahok's re-election. Despite the fact that their "kinship coalition" soon fell apart due to internal differences, it is significant that the political landscape can be shaped and reshaped by identity politics, especially in response to perceived assaults or challenges to religion. In this case, Ahok initially enjoyed a high approval rating and rallied behind a governing coalition while in office, but things changed even within his coalition after the accusation of blasphemy and he was then defeated in the following gubernatorial election.

Anies Baswedan won the 2017 Jakarta election with support from his party Gerindra, the PKS and others. This result served to build momentum for

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presidential hopeful Prabowo, who was standing on the same coalition's ticket. The result also harmed the chances of the other presidential hopeful Jokowi, who contested the 2019 election on the ticket of a governing coalition badly divided over Ahok.

Jokowi, the incumbent president, had long had his Islamic credentials questioned by some of his opponents, but picked a popular Islamic cleric and a former leader of NU, Ma'ruf Amin, as his running-mate for the election. This selection raised the eyebrows of many observers, both because Jokowi was perceived by many as a liberal figure, and also because Amin had testified against Ahok during the latter's conviction on blasphemy charges. Yet, the selection of Amin may have been meant by the president to counterbalance the consolidation of Islamist support for Prabowo and the rise of Islamic influence in politics.

The official presidential result of the 2019 election declared that Jokowi and Amin had won the top two posts to lead the archipelago, although Prabowo challenged the result in the Constitutional Court.

The legislative election put President Jokowi's secular Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P) in the lead with 19.33 percent of the popular vote. The Gerindra Party of the other presidential contender, Prabowo, gained additional five seats in parliament this time around, coming second in the popular vote in the People's Representative Council.



The PKS received an additional 3 million votes compared to its performance in the 2014 legislative election, emerging as the sixth largest party in parliament. The PKB also improved its vote by 0.65 percent while the other two Islamist parties, the PPP and PAN, suffered a decrease in their vote shares.

Conclusion

The religious sentiments in a largely homogenous Muslim society along with wide concerns among politicians across ideological line over the expanding economic and political roles of ethnically Chinese citizens may have made it easier for Islamist and nationalist parties to find common ground in recent Indonesian elections. Assaults on religious symbols and ethnic interests led to fear and anger among the public and they took to the streets and cast their votes in response to such perceived threats to their identity.

There is another possible point to be made here: that the lack of programmatic manifestoes seen at the Indonesian recent election campaign gave a boost to identity politics in the race, since more complicated differences such as the ideology and foreign policy of the state were not mentioned very often during the campaigns.

Most of all, the recent elections proved that religion is a significant actor in the political process in Indonesia, a fact now recognized by both sides of the political divide. This comes in a dynamic environment where identity can make an important impact in both elections and other civil activities.

It is evident that Islamists in Indonesia are particularly pragmatic, as they have been able to form electoral alliances

with political parties from different backgrounds. The ongoing alliance between the Islamist PKS and PAN, the nationalist Gerindra and the centrist Democratic Party suggests that Islamists and nationalists are able to initiate electoral pacts as common grounds can be identified where Islamic and national identities can be secured and national interests can be prioritized with no clashes of ideology.

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In the face of many external threats levelled at Muslim-majority nations in recent years, alliances between Islamists, nationalists and those with common concerns can be forged to handle these challenges, with public support for these forthcoming under certain circumstances.



Endnotes

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The Sharq Forum is an independent international network whose mission is to undertake impartial research and develop long-term strategies to ensure the political development, social justice and economic prosperity of the people of Al-Sharq. The Forum does this through promoting the ideals of democratic participation, an informed citizenry, multi-stakeholder dialogue, social justice, and public-spirited research.

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