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Declining support for Islamist Parties: Exploring the Indonesian ‘Paradox’

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Surveys and recent political developments in Indonesia have pointed to the rising influence of conservative and radical Islam in the country. Yet, the support for Islamist political parties in the April 9 elections has been limited. How does one make sense of this seeming paradox and what does it imply for the future of Islamism in Indonesia?

QUICK VOTE counts of the recent April 9 legislative elections in Indonesia have indicated that Muslim-based parties have managed to secure less than 24% of the total votes. The four Muslim-based parties, namely the Justice Prosperous Party (PKS), National Mandate Party (PAN), National Awakening Party (PKB) and the United Development Party (PPP) are expected to be represented in parliament, with each having secured between 5 to 8% of the total national votes. The total votes for PKS and PPP declined by approximately 2% compared to the previous election. Meanwhile, PAN and PKB, which have shed their Islamic image for a more secular one, suffered a total of 7% decline.

Trends

These outcomes are taking place within the context of the increasing influence of conservative as well as radical Islam in Indonesia. Over the past five years, there has been the introduction of some form of *shariah* in more than 40 regencies in Indonesia. The recent stance taken against the Ahmadiyah community, a heretical sect, as well as the passing of the anti-pornography bill, also suggested rising conservatism sweeping across the country. This could have been taken to hint at the rising influence of Islamist parties within the central and local governments.

To complement these developments, surveys and opinion polls conducted by the Indonesian Survey Institute (LSI) and the Centre for Islamic and Society Studies (PPIM) on conservatism, Muslim views on violence, and political Islam have revealed a tendency within society favouring more radical and conservative Islam in Indonesia. The most recent survey conducted by PPIM in 2008 revealed that most Islamic studies teachers in public and private schools in Java oppose pluralism and tend towards radicalism and conservatism. This raised concerns on how such anti-pluralist views would be reflected in their lessons as well as on the growing conservatism and radicalism among Muslims in the country.

With all these developments and indicators, one would have expected stronger support for Islamist parties in this round of elections. An almost optimistic outlook was set in place for the PKS which managed to gain substantially in electoral support from 1% to 7% in 2004 general election. At that time academics and observers even suggested that the Islamist parties would remain a significant political force in the incumbent parliament and play a prominent role in the 2009 elections. However, the quick counts have proven otherwise, and observers are concluding that the majority of Indonesians place more trust in secular-nationalist parties to run the country.

Rising Conservatism but Declining Votes for Islamist Parties

What serves this apparent “paradox” -- the rise in conservatism as indicated in the abovementioned polls, surveys and political developments but a fall in support for the Islamist parties? Several factors can be attributed to this phenomenon. The first is the separation of piety and politics in Indonesia: piety is not reflected in politics in Indonesia. This can be traced back to the dichotomisation between ‘cultural Islam’ and ‘political Islam’ during the Suharto era. It is necessary to recollect that as a result of Suharto’s repression of political Islam, Muslims had to resort to ‘cultural Islam’ in order to advance Islam and Muslim interests.

This was indicated by an increase in the number of mosques, madrasahs and haj pilgrimages to Mecca as well as the establishment of Islamic banking and insurance institutions. This practice of advancing Islam and Muslim interests outside the realm of politics has clearly extended into the post-Suharto era. Also, one’s religious orientation does not necessarily determine the support for a corresponding political party. Based on the latest survey by LP3ES, many Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah (the two largest moderate Muslim organisations) members favoured the secular Democratic Party rather than PKB or PAN.

A second possible reason for the paradox would be the availability of alternative channels in Indonesia’s vibrant democracy to forward Islamist agendas. Political participation is not only limited to the political parties, as there are also civil society groups and Islamic movements. The presence of political Islam in Indonesia is still very much alive in its politics, even if this is not exemplified through strong support for Islamist political parties. A clear example of strong support for Islamist organisations would be the ability of the Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) to mobilise the masses and stage large protests. The turnout for its rallies is also immensely huge.

Furthermore, elements in Indonesian society which tend towards more radical and extremist interpretations of Islam and wish to establish the *shariah* in Indonesia, or turn Indonesia into an Islamic state are more likely to disregard the mechanisms of party politics and have no regard for the democratic system. Instead, their support and efforts would be channelled into organisations such as HTI, Jamaah Anshoru Tauhid (JAT) and even militant groups like the Jemaah Islamiah (JI).

A recent report on the performance of Islamist parties in the recent legislative elections to establish a new parliament concluded that the majority of Indonesians trust secular-nationalist parties to run Indonesia more than parties that exploit religious symbols. Here, there is the underlying assumption that Islamist parties are the only ones who use Islam as their political commodity. This is erroneous as secular-nationalist parties also exploit religious symbols. In fact, this may be the very reason why there has been a decline in the support for Islamist parties -- the secular-nationalist parties have also resorted to the “Islamic agenda” and have been courting “Islamic forces”. For example, President Yudhoyono’s continuation with coalition partners PKS and other Muslim-based parties is a clear indicator of how national-secularist parties are closely engaged with their Islamic counterparts. This is so especially since the Islamist PKS is reputed to place strong emphasis on clean, efficient governance. Also, the anti-pornography bill was supported not only by the Muslim-based parties but

also secular-nationalist parties such as Golkar and the Democrat Party. Furthermore, not all *shariah*-based laws that were implemented in certain regions were initiated by Islamist parties.

Implications

Finally, what do all these imply for the future of conservative or even radical Islam in Indonesia? Despite the lack of support for Muslim-based parties, one cannot entirely dismiss their potential in influencing governance in Indonesia, as they will still be represented in the coalition government and parliament. Alternative avenues for pushing Islamist agendas are also available. The limited support enjoyed by Muslim-based or Islamist parties definitely does not signal an end or a reversing of the trend towards conservatism within Indonesian Muslim society.

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