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2017 Jakarta Election

The Unintended Effects on NU

By Satrio Dwicahyo

Synopsis

Tensions surrounding the Jakarta Election had benefited hardline groups thus widening their influence. Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) as the largest moderate Muslim organisation needs to respond to the situation by opening up inclusive collaborations with other moderate organisations.

Commentary

SINCE 2014, hardline Muslim groups such as the Islamic Defenders Front (*Front Pembela Islam*, FPI) started to exert their influence and leadership at the provincial level in Jakarta. This development came about following the inauguration of the governorship of Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (also known as 'Ahok') – Jakarta's second double minority governor who is both non-Muslim and of Chinese descent since Henk Ngantung in 1964. FPI flexed its hostile attitude towards Ahok in many ways including instigating to inaugurate a parallel governor during Ahok's tenure.

When encountered with such a situation, moderate Muslim groups including Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) do have some influence in undermining FPI's hold over the masses. FPI's consistent attention on problems faced by the *ummat* (Muslim community) gradually won them greater support. As a result it was not a surprise that Habib Rizieq Shihab, the FPI leader, was able to seize the spotlight rather easily in huge rallies organised on November and December 2016 to discredit Basuki.

Strengthening *Nahdliyin* Bonds: Is It Enough?

Thus, one can say that because of its outreach FPI had installed itself as an

increasingly influential organisation that can exploit a political situation regardless of who wins the election or runs Jakarta. The recent victory of the duo of Anies Baswedan and Sandiaga Uno for the governorship of Jakarta had further entrenched FPI's position. FPI's emergence as a major player will affect the *status quo* of moderate Islam in Indonesia.

With around 60 million members, NU is renowned for its capability to assist the government in ironing out national issues, particularly those concerning religion. When playing such a role, NU is to a great extent dependent upon the internal cohesion of its adherents, famously known as the *Nahdliyin*. NU believes that one of the dominant roles of the *nahdliyin* is to be the vanguard of the nation's interest as well as that of its large Muslim population.

The *Nahdliyin* are not officially registered and thus not tangibly identified since it is a religious stream without formal membership. Nonetheless the influence of the *Nahdliyin*, at least according to NU leaders, is often of paramount importance.

The religious obligation of the *Nahdliyin* emphasises communitarianism above other social values. Such an obligation is actually an effective tool to strengthen bonds and consensus within NU. The NU has manifested communitarianism in its relations with several types of *ulama*-centred congregations attended by *santri* - graduates of Islamic boarding schools known as *pesantren*. Communitarian practices within the *Nahdliyin* are strongly affiliated with the *pesantren*.

Most of these schools hailed from the rural precincts of Java. In early April 2017, NU held a grand prayer gathering (*istighosah qubro*) in East Java – its birthplace with the largest number of NU members. This prayer meet attracted about 500,000 attendees and had been claimed by some *Nahdliyin* as an act to contrast the huge rallies that took place in Jakarta. Through the mass prayer meet, NU accentuated its solidarity among followers and instituted loyalty towards the *ulama*.

Bringing Muslims Together: FPI's Edge?

On November 2016, a large congregation of Muslims of various persuasions had gathered in Jakarta with the explicit demand for Ahok to be prosecuted for allegedly insulting Islam (the event was known as *Aksi 411*). On account of their varied ideological stances and backgrounds, these Muslim groups were typically perceived as independent bodies.

Nevertheless, the domination of FPI and Rizieq Shihab as charismatic leader and solidarity maker became a point of convergence for these disparate groups. Apparently Rizieq Shihab and FPI had successfully framed Ahok as the common enemy of the Muslims, causing polemical rhetoric.

Within the narrative of a common enemy, Rizieq Shihab spoke a unifying language that encompasses Muslims while alienating non-Muslims. Rizieq Shihab was able to maintain inter-organisational solidarity only by diverting attention to a false flag of the common enemy. With regard to Anies Baswedan and Sandiaga Uno's victory, Rizieq Shihab had reasons to be forceful in furthering FPI's interest. It must be said that the

alliance between Riziq Shihab and the winning pair of candidates stands on a common interest that benefitted both parties.

With the ability to bridge different interests, at least during the rallies, FPI had succeeded in undermining NU's preference for internal communication and consensus with its explicit calls for demonstration. FPI also places the role of *Lembaga Persaudaraan Ormas Islam/LPOI* (Islamic Organisations Solidarity Board) on a pedestal, neutralising NU's platform in playing a crucial role on intra-organisation dialogue.

FPI, NU, and the Changing Political Ground

NU's membership is undoubtedly large. This means that the organisation enjoys a wealth of human capital. Nevertheless, recent leadership and other changes within the organisation had raised the classical question of quality versus quantity among NU members. NU needs to bridge its social capital with other moderate Muslims in order to regain its initiative from hardline groups.

Moderate Muslims, particularly members of NU, must re-examine their outlook and attitude towards FPI. It is no longer perceived solely as a fringe group that breeds vigilantism. With its history as a pressure group, FPI (and Riziq Shihab) have shown that they are fast matching, if not overtaking, NU in courting the hearts and minds of the Indonesian Muslim population. Muslims who are marginalised economically are especially more susceptible to FPI's sway.

Currently, FPI is very much immune from counter-arguments launched by NU. Mirroring NU's identity as a nationalist, moderate, and tolerant group, the FPI has been shrewd in its appropriation of the dominant narrative. With the *Nahdliyin* tradition as its basis, the FPI does not advocate for Indonesia becoming an Islamic state. In recent developments, the FPI has been maintaining such a nationalist stance so as to attract potential sympathisers who are not interested with the grandiose idea of the Islamic state.

The FPI has since garnered larger political clout among the Muslim population. NU must be able to adapt with this change and should view the promotion of religious moderation as its priority. Continuing its excellent work on intra-organisation bonding, NU should establish stronger inter-organisational ties based on its core values of moderation and tolerance.

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