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Indonesia's Ideological Convergence: Emerging Trend in Islamic Regulations?

By Alexander R Arifianto

Synopsis

There is an emerging ideological convergence among activists from different Indonesian Islamic groups toward a more Shariah-oriented outlook. Such a convergence can be seen from the joint efforts of these activists to enact local Islamic regulations in various Indonesian regions.

Commentary

SINCE THE Defending Islam rallies in late 2016 and early 2017, there is a perception of a growing ideological convergence between clerics and activists affiliated with different Indonesian Islamic groups, ranging from mainstream ones such as Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah – the two largest Indonesian Islamic groups, to the more conservative groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) and Islamic Defenders Front (FPI).

Beyond the headlines, this apparent convergence can be found in numerous localities throughout Indonesia. Since Indonesia's political decentralisation began in 2001, activists from these groups have worked together in numerous localities throughout Indonesia to successfully enact and implement local *shari'ah* regulations known as *perda shari'ah* in these localities. As of today, nearly 450 local regulations have been implemented by more than 100 Indonesian cities and municipalities.

The Pamekasan Case

Previous research on Islamic regulations in Indonesia concluded that these regulations were developed to bolster the Islamic credentials of local mayors or regents (*bupati*) so that they could easily win re-election to their positions. They also found the regulations tend to be enacted in the regions with a strong history of

Islamism in their politics, for instance, in West Java and South Sulawesi provinces, which were former sites of the *Darul Islam* rebellion during the 1950s and early 1960s.

However, research by the RSIS' Indonesia Programme found these regulations are enacted by local councils (DPRD) and executives after extensive lobbying by prominent clerics representing a wide variety of Islamic organisations, which lends support to the ideological convergence thesis outlined above. Also these regulations are now being introduced in areas that historically do not have a strong tradition of regional Islamism, such as in East and Central Java provinces.

An example can be found in the Pamekasan District in Madura Island, East Java province. The regulation here was enacted after an extensive lobbying campaign by a group of local religious scholars (*ulama*). They were united under the banner of the local branch of the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI), with support from the local branches of NU, Muhammadiyah, Al Irsyad, and Sarekat Islam (SI).

The *perda* was enacted unanimously by Pamekasan's legislative council owing to the united support from these Islamic organisations, which argued the regulation should be enacted because of the strong Islamic tradition present both within the regency and Madura Island in general.

Uztaz Dwiyanto, the deputy chairman of MUI branch in Pamekasan, said no DPRD councillors were willing to oppose it, as the *ulama* would have "campaigned to vote them out of office" if they expressed any opposition to the regulation. Kyai Haji Kholilur-Rahman, a notable cleric who led the movement to enact the regulation, was then elected as the *Bupati* of Pamekasan from 2008 to 2013.

After Pamekasan enacted the first *perda* in 2003, at least five additional regulations were also enacted by the regency -- including those which require women to wear headscarves (*hijab*) while appearing in public places, require all primary school graduates to be tested on their Qur'anic reading proficiency, prohibit the sale of alcoholic beverages, and prohibit the establishment of nightclubs and other forms of entertainment within the regency.

The Bojonegoro Regulation

A second example can be found in Bojonegoro District, in the border between East and Central Java provinces. While it is historically known as an area where non-observant Muslims (*abangan*) predominated as late as the 1980s, it is now transformed as a region where deep expressions of Islamic piety now can be seen clearly in the public sphere. This motivates a group of local clerics to promote a *perda* mandating primary school graduates to recite the Qur'an properly.

Introduced in 2017, the proposed regulation receives strong support from local branches of Islamic organisations, ranging from NU and Muhammadiyah to more conservative groups like HTI. The latter organisation is having an increased following within this rural region. It has established its own Islamic cooperative, which has attracted many small farmers and tradesmen to become its members, because it does not charge any interests on its loans.

With the Islamist Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) as its primary sponsor, the regulation receives wide support from Bojonegoro's legislative council. The only party which publicly opposes its enactment is the Indonesian Democratic Party Struggle (PDIP), which expresses concerns that the regulation intervenes in the private lives of Bojonegoro residents.

It also believes the *perda* can be perceived as a regulation that favours Muslims over other religious faiths, something that violates Indonesia's national ideology Pancasila, which promotes the equality of all recognised religious groups in Indonesia.

However, other parties represented in the legislative council have expressed their support for the *perda*, because they do not want to be seen as intimidating the local ulama who are unanimously supporting it, especially as the regency is due to hold its local election in June this year. It is expected to win an easy passage in the council.

Underlying Implications

The effective lobbying for local *shari'ah* regulations in Pamekasan and Bojonegoro districts illustrates the emerging ideological convergence among activists of mainstream and more conservative Islamic groups in Indonesia to support the enactment of these regulations. This is notwithstanding the fact they are contradictory to the national ideology of *Pancasila* and the 1945 Indonesian constitution, which bars the creation of laws that favours one religious group above others.

The proliferation of these regulations in multiple localities throughout Indonesia is a 'bottom-up' strategy by Islamic groups to change Indonesia's legal foundation to become more religiously-based instead of Pancasila-based. This is something Indonesian policymakers should be paying more attention to in order to better appreciate the implications for nation building.

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