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Indonesian Presidential Election 2019

Grand Narratives in Outer Provinces: Impact of Islam on Politics

By Andar Nubowo

SYNOPSIS

The 212 movements of pious Muslims are not just a Javanese phenomenon. In the outer provinces in West Sumatra, North Sumatra, South Sulawesi and North Sulawesi, the 212 grand narratives influence local Muslim voters in determining their vote. What are the prominent narratives and issues influencing Muslim voters during the ongoing presidential election?

COMMENTARY

THE 2019 PRESIDENTIAL election is a face-off between two old rivals – incumbent president Joko Widodo (Jokowi) and his challenger Prabowo Subianto. While some electoral issues are identical to the 2014 election when they first clashed, such as the economy, nationalism, social, and political identity, not all are going to be similar. As some described it, the “conservative turn” in the form of a massive peaceful protest on 2 December 2016 organised by *Aksi Bela Islam* (The Defending Islam Action or 212) could be a game changer.

After their successful campaign to oust former Jakarta governor Basuki Tjahaya Purnama (Ahok), conservative groups that comprise the 212 movements are now aiming to replace President Jokowi in this April's presidential election. They are overwhelmingly backing Jokowi's opponent Prabowo and his vice-presidential nominee Sandiaga Uno as the ideal Muslim candidates.

The 212 Spirit

After their successful movement which resulted in Ahok's re-election defeat and his

two-year imprisonment over a blasphemy charge, the 212 movements have become an influential phenomenon in Indonesian politics. It is not only encouraging Muslims to express their social, economic, and political views and preferences but also making both presidential candidates - Jokowi and Prabowo – shift their politics to become more accommodative and attentive to Islamic concerns.

As a reaction to the 212 movements, Jokowi is now attempting to burnish his Islamic credentials. He is now more routinely seen performing Friday prayers and visiting Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*). The appointment of Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI) chairman Ma'ruf Amin as his vice presidential running mate is part of this strategy as well.

While he was raised in a secular family, Prabowo is now developing his network with conservative Islamic activists and groups which had endorsed his candidacy. As a result, Prabowo has amassed backings from conservative activists such as Habib Rizieq Shihab, founder of Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), and Amien Rais, a Muhammadiyah leader and founder of the National Mandate Party (PAN).

His running mate Sandiaga Uno also portrayed himself as a young and pious Muslim entrepreneur. The Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) – an Islamist party which also backs Prabowo – has described Sandi as “a new *santri* of Post Islamism”.

Good and Bad Muslim

In recent field trips conducted in West Sumatra, North Sumatra, South Sulawesi, and North Sulawesi provinces, I found conservative Muslims portraying both presidential candidate pairs – Jokowi-Ma'ruf and Prabowo-Sandi – differently. They considered Jokowi's effort to brandish his Islamic credentials as “too little too late,” having previously criminalised some *ulamas* who had opposed him. While Prabowo is also not considered a good *santri*, he is closer to what these conservatives believe to be their aspirations.

Jokowi's appointment of Ma'ruf Amin is not enough to convince them. Some prominent clerics of *Pesantren As'adiyah* in Wajo South Sulawesi, for example, using allegorical language, preferred to drink a cup of “*kopi pahit* (black coffee) with a little sugar” than that of “*kopi susu dengan teh*” (milk coffee blended with tea).

The message was that Ma'ruf Amin's selection is not sufficient enough to burnish Jokowi's Islamic credentials. They would rather vote for a young entrepreneur with little political experience like Sandi, even though he is a *kopi pahit* with a little sugar (little Islamic credentials).

Positioning Support as an Islamic Obligation

In the same vein, local respondents from organisations such as Persatuan Tarbiyah Islamiyah (Perti), Wahdah Islamiyah, Darul Istiqamah, and Muhammadiyah in West Sumatra and South Sulawesi have revealed their discontent for Jokowi-Ma'ruf.

Accordingly, Jokowi's policies are perceived to be ineffective when dealing with the economic crisis, massive debts, and socio-political injustices in which poor Muslims

are suffering from. They also looked at Jokowi's neo-liberal economic policy which courts foreign investors. Jokowi is perceived as a weak president who does not support Muslim aspirations.

For conservatives, defeating Jokowi-Ma'ruf and inversely orchestrating a win for Prabowo-Sandi is an Islamic obligation. They believe that voting for Prabowo is both a spiritual and religious duty, as it is in accordance with the *ulama's* political fatwa based on the 16 September 2018 consensus from the Second Ijtima Ulama (Grand Gathering of Ulama).

Rahmat Surya, a local ustaz and businessman who pledged an oath to Habib Rizieq, emphasised during an interview: "If I wrongly chose Prabowo-Sandi, my sin is the *ulama's* responsibility. However, if I incorrectly choose Jokowi-Ma'ruf, then no one bears my sin, because the *ulama* did not support them".

The Prabowo-Sandi pair are not only viewed as the combination best able to address Indonesia's developmental challenges but also pave the way for deeper Islamisation. To aid that cause, they exhorted Islamic doctrines such as *al-ukhuwah al-Islamiyah* (Islamic solidarity) and *da'wah* (religious preaching) to motivate all Muslims to support Prabowo-Sandi.

National Impact

Two months ahead of the 2019 presidential election, it is hard to forecast accurately who will win "the hearts and minds" of the people. Some reputable pollsters have consistently predicted Jokowi-Ma'ruf pair to be ahead over the Prabowo-Sandi pair with a margin between 20 to 30 per cent. However, for his die-hard supporters, Prabowo's victory is inevitable, unless there is electoral cheating.

After Aksi 212, Islamic conservatism has become more apparent, as these groups have constituted not just a socio-religious driving force but also a political force that has been successful in changing Indonesia's political landscape. The case of the Jakarta gubernatorial election and the 2018 Simultaneous Regional Elections (*Pilkada Serentak*) are excellent illustrations of the growing political significance of the 212 movements.

In those elections, the 212 spirit and grand narratives were prominently applied, although the *Pilkada Serentak's* overall results were not as successful for the conservatives as in the Jakarta *Pilkada*.

Regardless of who wins the election, the growing tide of Islamic piety (or conservatism to others) in Indonesia as signified with the remarkable 212 movements will not be a one-off phenomenon. It has a considerable impact in shaping Indonesian Muslims' narratives and their political behaviour during the ongoing presidential election. In the future, they can have considerable influence in shaping Indonesia's public policy, regardless of who is elected president in April 2019.

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Nanyang Technological University

Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg