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Indonesian Presidential Election 2019

The Three Streams Facing Indonesian Muslims: Pulls of Politics

By Andar Nubowo and Jefferson Ng

SYNOPSIS

Indonesians are well-aware of the de facto alliance between presidential contender Prabowo Subianto and some Islamist groups. What are the likely effects of religious factors on the 2019 presidential election and how will they shape the future of Indonesian Islam?

COMMENTARY

HISTORICALLY ISLAM in Indonesia has led to the birth of two mainstream Islamic organisations Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah. Both are considered the spiritual heirs of an inclusive version of Islam shaped by Javanese culture and modernism (in Muhammadiyah's case).

At the same time, Indonesia watchers have noted the re-emergence of Islamism as the third force in Indonesia's Muslim community since the early 1990s during the Suharto era. These diverse groups share a common goal of instituting Shar'ia law in Indonesia and take a stricter view of religious and cultural differences.

Three Streams in Indonesia's Muslim Community

The ongoing presidential election, as well as the contestation between and within the three streams of Indonesian Muslims, is a reflection of the fundamental divergence in the vision of the Indonesian state stretching back to the 1945 Jakarta Charter. Although the obligation for Muslims to abide by Islamic law was removed from Constitution, the basic contestation over the nature of the Indonesian Pancasila state

remains. This historical lens provides a means to interpret the three different tendencies as presented below.

Munajat 212: Gathering of Pro-Prabowo Supporters

On 21 February 2019, the Jakarta chapter of the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI) organised a mass prayer event (212 Munajat Night) at the National Monument Square (Monumen Nasional, or Monas). Attendees came together to pray and wish for a safe, peaceful, and harmonious general election.

The event was marked by the attendance of political figures from presidential aspirant Prabowo Subianto's coalition, including members of his campaign team and party. In addition, Islamic groups such as the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) and the Presidium Alumni 212, which had made clear their opposition to President Joko Widodo ("Jokowi"), turned up.

The event clearly aimed to re-energise the Aksi Bela Islam (Defending Islam) coalition prior to the April elections by harking back to the original mass gathering at Monas known as Action 212 (2 December 2016). These Islamic activists are openly hostile to Jokowi for implementing what they regard as "anti-Islamic" policies.

In their worldview, President Jokowi, who is the other presidential contender, had threatened their interests by "selling out" the country to non-Muslims. In that regard, their support for Prabowo is tactical.

Ma'ruf Amin: It's Politics Not Religion

The 212 Munajat event underscored the broader phenomenon of the split in the Muslim voter base between Jokowi and Prabowo, with a strong correlation between political orientation and religious identity.

A recent survey conducted by Lingkaran Survei Indonesia (LSI) found that 57% of Muslims who saw Indonesia as a Pancasila State (founded on Five Principles) supported Jokowi; 54% of Muslims who believed that Indonesia should be an Islamic country (based on Islamic Principles) supported Prabowo. Therefore, voting preferences highlighted the ongoing struggle between the two different visions of the Indonesian nation.

For instance, the nomination of Ma'ruf Amin as Jokowi's running mate was a blow to many of Jokowi's more liberal-minded supporters, who hold Ma'ruf Amin responsible for the jailing of Basuki Tjahaja Purnama ("Ahok"). Given his conservative track record, Jokowi's supporters also question Ma'ruf Amin's ability to uphold Indonesia's religious diversity and pluralism. At the same time, Ma'ruf Amin was deemed by Islamist and conservative groups to have crossed into Jokowi's camp and abandoned their cause.

There is thus a significant element of religious polarisation. Yet, the fact that Jokowi also uses the Forum Betawi Rempug (FBR), a pro-Jokowi Islamic group, to counteract FPI's influence and serve as election monitors, indicates that these divisions mainly reflect political preferences than divergences over religion.

Divisions in NU and Muhammadiyah

Divisions have also emerged within NU and Muhammadiyah. Surveys indicate that Muhammadiyah members prefer the pair of Prabowo-Sandi and NU Jokowi-Ma'ruf Amin; but there are also subdivisions within the two organisations.

For instance, some Muhammadiyah activists are actively developing and contributing to Jokowi's volunteer networks such as Rumah Indonesia Berkemajuan (House of Indonesia with Progress). On the other hand, Muhammadiyah supporters such as Aliansi Pencerah Indonesia (Alliance of Indonesian Enlighteners) work to support Prabowo-Sandi. Although Muhammadiyah is institutionally non-partisan, Muhammadiyah members are becoming more polarised than before.

The same polarisation is also unfolding in NU between the "structural" and "cultural" NU kiyais (clerics). The former group constitutes NU ulamas embedded in official positions in the organisation led by NU Chairman Said Aqil Siradj, while the latter constitutes kiyais culturally affiliated with NU but not involved in the actual organisational structure.

In some Central and East Java areas, prominent "cultural" clerics who view Jokowi as a danger to the future of NU, are critical of Said Aqil's leadership. Solahuddin Wahid (brother of the late president Abdurrahman Wahid), whose lineage gives him influence, also criticised Said Aqil for being too deeply involved in the political game of the 2019 elections.

Javanese Disposition & Politics

The three examples above indicate that political cleavages associated with the 2019 presidential election and the larger contention over the basic nature of the Indonesian state are widening the cracks within the Indonesian Muslim community. Divisions in NU and Muhammadiyah threaten the very foundation of Islamic moderation as exemplified by the two mainstream bodies — even if the differences are mainly political.

NU's clerics in Solo interviewed by RSIS' Indonesia Programme stated: "This is a critical time. If Jokowi-Ma'ruf loses, NU's tradition will be threatened by Islamic ideology seeking to replace the unitary state and Pancasila with Shar'ia. If the time comes, NU will ally with nationalist people to thwart them, including those from Muhammadiyah."

It is interesting that Jokowi has both built a coalition threatened by growing conservatism while at the same time sought to partially accommodate it through the selection of Ma'ruf Amin and courting conservative ulamas. Nonetheless, it reflects the basic Javanese disposition to assimilate and avoid open conflict.

The splits within the Indonesian Muslim community are highly likely to reflect both in the electoral voting patterns and the longer-term trajectory of Indonesia. Muslim voters in this election would likely be swayed to a large extent by the presidential candidate best able to represent their vision of Indonesia.

Andar Nubowo is an Associate Research Fellow and Jefferson Ng a Graduate Research Assistant with the Indonesia Programme, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. This is part of an RSIS series on Indonesia's 2019 Presidential Election.

Nanyang Technological University

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