

*RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical and contemporary issues. The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email to Mr Yang Razali Kassim, Editor RSIS Commentary at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.*

*Indonesian Presidential Election 2019*

## **Abangan, Santri, and Priyayi: Three Streams in Indonesia's Electoral Politics**

*By Syafiq Hasyim*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*The categorisation of abangan, santri and priyayi remains relevant for discussion in the Indonesian general election of 2019. These groups exist and political parties and presidential candidates compete vigorously for their votes.*

### **COMMENTARY**

CLIFFORD GEERTZ, in his book *The Religion of Java* categorises the Javanese people into three streams (*aliran*): *abangan*, *santri*, and *priyayi*. The term *abangan* represents the peasant community and Javanese syncretism. The term *santri* represents Islamic groups who are products of an Islamic education system. The term *priyayi* is used to refer to the Javanese bureaucrats and aristocracy.

Many criticise Geertz's categorization as no longer valid in the present Indonesian context. However, these three groups of people are always discovered and produce social, religious and political relevance to Indonesia's contemporary situation. Politics that uses these three categories is called *politik aliran*, or the politics of the Javanese streams.

### **Dissecting the Three Streams of Java**

Until recently, Central Java is a province in which the presence of these *alirans* is easily found, with the domination of *kaum abangan* remaining significant. This is a region which is assumed to be the central precinct of the *kaum abangan*. Usually, this area is dominated by nationalist and secular parties especially the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP).

This is also a region where the mass-based *kaum santri* are found such as in Demak, Jepara, and Kudus. Islam-oriented parties like PKB and PPP are quite dominant in these areas. The *kaum priyayi* are usually concentrated around places in which former Javanese kingdoms were established.

In the last decade, starting from the presidential election 2014, there has been a strong and categorical shift in the social and religious orientations of the three *aliran* groups. Their identities are melting and blurring, no longer strictly restricted to one group or category. This could be due to the rapid shift in their economic and political circumstances.

Many important political positions in Central Java reflect mutual acceptance and influence between the *kaum abangan* and the *kaum santri*. The *kaum abangan* accommodate the cultural and religious identity of *kaum santri* in their lifestyle, on one hand, while the *kaum santri* accept the presence of *kaum abangan* on the other hand. The Governor Ganjar Pranowo, for example, comes from an *abangan* family and the PDIP while his Vice Governor, Taj Yasin, represents Nahdlatul Ulama and PPP of Central Java. Their pairing illustrates the important shift and relaxation of *aliran* strictness.

### **Transformation of the *Abangan***

Does the *kaum abangan* transform into a different category, for example into *santri* or *priyayi* in terms of their social, cultural and religious inclination? My recent fieldwork indicates that the *kaum abangan* tend to embrace some elements of the *santri*'s inclination. The *kaum abangan* of Surakarta, Pati, Banyumas, Wonosobo and some others have manifested important changes in their cultural and religious leanings towards the *kaum santri*.

Politically speaking, they remain followers of secular and nationalist parties, but are open to different identities. Some areas identified for long as the centre of *abangan*, like Solo and Sukoharjo, now see the proliferation of Islamic centres of activities such as Islamic schools, mosques, and social-religious activities – *Pengajian* (Islamic study groups) and *Majlis Taklim* (religious classes).

However, some changes in the identity of the *kaum abangan* do not automatically influence their preference in the political party. Central Java is still a significant province favouring the PDIP since Indonesia's reform era up till the presidency of Joko Widodo.

### **When *Priyayi* Becomes More Pious**

A similar leaning taking place among the *kaum abangan* is found in the *kaum priyayi*. This bureaucratic class seems to be inclined to the *kaum santri* rather than the *kaum abangan*. Many *priyayi* tend to adopt the religious inclination of *kaum santri*. Several major cities of which *kaum priyayi* dwell indicate a strong phenomenon of *santrinisasi*.

Islamic events are often organised around the *priyayi*'s dwelling zones in Central Java.

The offices of governors and mayors at several provincial and district levels are no longer shy to display Islamic symbols. Their administrators and bureaucrats appear with strict code of sharia dress in their daily works. It can only happen in the democratic era of Indonesia.

However, the current *santrinisasi* of *priyayi* is much more driven by the emergence of identity politics. In this regard, they get involved in Islamic practice groups. To some extent, the families of *priyayi* at various levels, for instance, get involved in the Islamic movement. Some of them affiliate with the Islam-oriented political parties such as PPP, PAN, and PKS. They also promote a limited circle of study on Islam like in Yogyakarta and Solo.

### **Between Liberating and Limiting *Santri***

The direct involvement of the *kaum santri* in Indonesia's electoral politics, as evident in the general elections of 2019, makes the definition of *santri* highly contested. Ma'ruf Amin is the running mate of Joko Widodo ("Jokowi"). He is an icon of Indonesia's *santri* class due to his prominent positions in two major religious platforms – as general chairman the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI) and head of Syuriah Board of Nahdlatul Ulama, the largest Islamic organisation in Indonesia.

This pairing is very interesting and makes us understand the growing importance of the *santri's* position in Indonesian politics. While Ma'ruf Amin, the cleric of NU and MUI, is appointed the vice-presidential candidate with Jokowi, the challenger, Prabowo Subianto, also claims another '*santri*', Sandiaga Salahuddin Uno ("Sandi"), as a vice presidential candidate.

Indeed, for his pairing with Prabowo, Sandi was referred to as a "post-islamist *santri*" by the president of PKS. There was no further explanation about what the PKS leader meant by this term. Clearly the *kaum santri* are now considered as important political players.

Based on this explanation, the definition of *santri* has become wider, looser and more political. This new definition, however, is not totally acceptable to the *santri* themselves because they feel it can denigrate the dignity of the *kaum santri*. To them, *santri* are the products of the *pesantren* or Islamic education system, not of political preference.

### **Meaning for Indonesia's 2019 General Election**

Three conclusions can be made from these observations:

Firstly, the transformations or changes in the religious inclinations of these three groups are not always accompanied by changes in their political preferences. PDIP remains very strong in the *abangan* zone like in Central Java while the Islamist parties PPP, PKB and PKS, are equally strong in their *santri* zone.

Secondly, the emergence of identity politics has contributed to the *santrinisasi* of both the *abangan* and *priyayi* classes, although they are not monolithic. Most of the *kaum abangan* have mutual acceptance with the traditionalist *santri* and most of the

*priyayi* have mutual acceptance with the modernist or reform-minded *santri* like those in PKS and Muhammadiyah.

Thirdly, the change or mutual acceptance and influence of different identities happening among *abangan*, *santri*, and *priyayi* is expected to narrow the polarisation caused by electoral politics.

---

*Syafiq Hasyim is a Visiting Fellow at the Indonesia Programme of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. This is part of a series on Indonesia's presidential election 2019.*

---

**Nanyang Technological University**

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