

The State of Political Islam in Indonesia: The Historical Antecedent and Future Prospects

Alexander R. Arifianto



ALEXANDER R. ARIFANTO is a Research Fellow of the Indonesia Programme at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) at Nanyang Technological University (Singapore). His ORCID ID number is 0000-0003-1626-4599. He can be reached at <isalex@ntu.edu.sg>.

NOTE ≈ The author would like to thank two anonymous reviewers for their helpful feedback on a previous draft of this article.

KEYWORDS: INDONESIA; POLITICAL ISLAM; ISLAMISM; NAHDLATUL ULAMA; MUHAMMADIYAH

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This article argues that the recent rise of Islamism in Indonesia can be attributed to its proponents' savviness in utilizing innovative propagation outlets alongside the declining authority of moderate organizations like Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah.

MAIN ARGUMENT

The recent prominence of conservative and hard-line Islamism in Indonesia—as seen during the 2016 Defending Islam rallies and the 2019 Indonesian presidential election campaign—is not an isolated, one-time phenomenon. Islamism has a long historical precedence dating back to Indonesia's independence in 1945 when the country's founders debated whether Islamist principles should be part of the constitution and national ideology. Public expressions of Islamism returned to the fore when Suharto fell from power in 1998. Conservative Islamists have been able to gain followers and political influence due to their shrewdness in utilizing new and innovative propagation methods on university campuses and the internet. In the meantime, the authority of NU and Muhammadiyah—Indonesia's two largest moderate Islamic organizations—has declined due to the increasing role of quasi-state Islamic institutions like the Indonesian Ulama Council, competition from conservative and hard-line Islamist organizations, and factionalism from within these organizations driven by activists who sympathize with the ideological and political goals of conservative groups. Government efforts to suppress these groups risk further undermining Indonesia's young democracy. Instead, NU and Muhammadiyah should take the lead in countering the growing Islamist influence.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- The rise of Islamism in Indonesia has a long historical antecedent and is expected to continue influencing the country's intermediate political future.
- Despite their decreasing authority, NU and Muhammadiyah still represent the greatest hope for a moderating force to counterbalance the influence of conservative and hard-line Islamist organizations.
- Initiatives to counter Islamism in Indonesia are best left to moderate Islamic organizations—with support from the Indonesian government—since they have more authority and credibility among the Muslim community. Assistance from external actors (e.g., Western aid agencies) to NU and Muhammadiyah activists to help counter the influence of Islamist organizations is likely to be counterproductive.

Indonesia—the largest Muslim-majority country in the world—has long been considered a nation where moderate, civil Islamic discourse can prevail. However, Islamism has re-emerged as an ongoing concern among scholars and analysts of Indonesian politics. This concern has become more pronounced after the watershed 2016 Defending Islam rallies against former Jakarta governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (commonly known as Ahok), which led to the defeat of his re-election campaign and subsequent conviction for an allegation of religious blasphemy. The rallies were attended by approximately one million protesters from all over Indonesia and organized by a coalition of Islamist groups that included the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), Hizb ut-Tahrir Indonesia (HTI), and dozens of others. After their successful campaign against Ahok, many of these protesters went on to support the presidential campaign of Prabowo Subianto, a retired general and former son-in-law of Indonesian dictator Suharto, against incumbent president Joko Widodo (commonly known as Jokowi). They became Prabowo's most ardent supporters and played a key role in increasing turnout for him during the 2019 election.¹

Prabowo's eventual defeat and subsequent post-election alliance with Jokowi have made observers wonder whether the Islamist challenge against Jokowi during his second (and final) five-year term has been dealt a major setback, and whether the ambition to turn Indonesia into a country run by Islamic principles has been quashed. However, the recent rise of Islamism in Indonesia did not come out of nowhere. Instead, it has a long history that dates back to the country's struggle for independence in 1945. Over the past seven decades, Islamism has ebbed and flowed according to changing political circumstances. It was constrained by Sukarno's and Suharto's authoritarianism, as well as by theological counterpoints provided by moderate Islamic groups and activists who dominated Indonesia's public sphere from the 1970s to the early 2000s. As I argue in this article, conservative and hard-line Islamists have been able to make a comeback in Indonesian politics and society because of their ability to use new and innovative outlets where they have a comparative advantage over their moderate opponents.

This article defines "Islamist" based on the characterization by Ioana Emy Matesan that such groups are "sociopolitical organizations that use their interpretation of Islamic principles as a reference point and that seek

¹ For further details on Prabowo's alliance with the Islamic activists during the 2019 Indonesian presidential election, see Alexander R. Arifianto, "What the 2019 Election Says about Indonesian Democracy," *Asia Policy* 14, no. 4 (2019): 46–53.

to apply these principles in public life.”² Since this definition is broad, I further classify Islamists into two categories: “conservative” and “hard-line.” Conservative Islamists support the application of Islamic principles as a legal foundation for the state and society, largely promoting them through peaceful means—for instance, by sponsoring protests or participating in democratic elections. Indonesian Islamist groups like the Prosperous Justice Party fall into this category. Hard-line Islamists also want to introduce Islamic principles as a legal foundation for the state, but they reject democratic principles on theological grounds and use coercion, intimidation, and either rhetorical or physical violence to accomplish their goals. Groups like FPI and HTI belong to this category.³

The rising influence of conservative and hard-line Islamists groups is also aided by the gradual decline of the authority of moderate Islamic groups like Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah after the rise of the quasi-statist Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI) in the early 2000s. NU and Muhammadiyah belong to a different category: “moderate” Islamic groups. While these groups utilize Islamic principles as a reference point for political discourse, they combine such principles with other norms such as nationalism and democracy. More importantly, they reject efforts to “Islamize” the Indonesian state and society. The aforementioned classification that applies to any particular Islamic group is not static; instead, a group may occupy a different category in different periods of its history. This applies, in particular, to groups like NU and Muhammadiyah, which have a history that predates Indonesia’s independence and have always been active players in the country’s postcolonial politics. Both groups would have been considered “conservative Islamist” during the 1940s and 1950s, when they did not accept Pancasila as part of their ideologies and advocated for the adoption of an Islamic state through electoral means.⁴ However, from the 1980s onward, they have been classified as moderate Islamic groups due to their acceptance of Pancasila

² Ioana Emy Matesan, “Grievances and Fears in Islamist Movements: Revisiting the Link between Exclusion, Insecurity, and Political Violence,” *Journal of Global Security Studies* 5, no. 1 (2020): 44–45.

³ Readers must note that this article only covers Islamist groups that are actively engaging in political mobilization to implement their preferred agenda by utilizing Indonesia’s democratic political institutions. It does not address groups that seek to implement this agenda primarily through violent means. Recent studies regarding violent Islamist groups and activists in Indonesia include Julie Chernov Hwang, *Why Terrorists Quit: The Disengagement of Indonesian Jihadists* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018).

⁴ Pancasila is Indonesia’s national ideology that was invented by the country’s founding fathers when they declared independence from colonial rule in 1945. It comprises five main principles: belief in one monotheistic God, humanism, national unity, democracy through consensus, and social justice. For a historical institutionalist account of the political contestation over Pancasila and how it has shaped state-religion relations in Indonesia, see Jeremy Menchik, *Islam and Democracy in Indonesia: Tolerance without Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

and their combination of Islamic principles with Indonesian nationalism and Western-based norms, such as religious pluralism and tolerance, as part of the Islamic interpretation that they promote in the public sphere. Today, the authority of NU and Muhammadiyah is in decline due to heightened competition from new Islamist groups and the increasing factionalism within their own ranks between moderate leaders and activists and those holding conservative, Islamist-leaning theological and political positions.

What is the historical antecedent that leads to the rise of conservative Islamism and the decline of moderate Islam in Indonesia? How has the Indonesian government under President Jokowi responded to the challenge of growing Islamic conservatism? And what are plausible scenarios for the future of political Islam in Indonesia and its potential implications for policymakers? This article aims to answer these questions in the following sections:

- ≈ pp. 115–18 outline a short history of Islamism in Indonesia from the country's independence in 1945 until the fall of the Suharto regime in 1998.
- ≈ pp. 118–22 explain how new Islamist groups managed to gradually dominate Indonesia's public sphere post-Reformasi through propagation venues such as university campuses and the internet.
- ≈ pp. 122–27 show how the authority of moderate Indonesian Islamic groups like NU and Muhammadiyah is gradually declining due to the rise of quasi-state institutions like MUI and the increasing challenges faced by these groups from conservative Islamists both within and without.
- ≈ pp. 127–30 analyze the policies enacted by Jokowi to counter the rise of Islamism, ranging from co-optation to more coercive measures.
- ≈ pp. 130–32 conclude with some thoughts on the future of political Islam in Indonesia and how policymakers can respond to it without further eroding the country's fragile democratic norms and institutions.

A SHORT HISTORY OF ISLAMISM IN INDONESIA (1945–98)

Conservative Islamism has existed throughout Indonesia's postcolonial history and was usually distinguished as the desire to adopt Islamic legal principles (*sharia*) as the political foundation of the Indonesian state. The efforts to achieve this began in earnest when the country's founding fathers, who were part of the Investigating Committee for Preparatory Work for Indonesian Independence (BPUPKI), began the process of drafting the future independent Indonesia's national ideology and constitution in June 1945. Some members of the committee—from NU, Muhammadiyah, and other Islamic groups—held firm in their demand that a clause obligating

all Muslims to follow sharia principles (later known as the Jakarta Charter) should be included as part of Indonesia's constitution. They also insisted that the constitution draft must include a provision that future Indonesian presidents must be of Muslim faith.⁵ While secular nationalist members of BPUPKI initially agreed to these demands, the aforementioned provisions were abrogated on August 18, 1945, one day after Indonesia's declaration of independence. Amid concerns that Christian-majority regions of Eastern Indonesia would secede from the newly declared republic if these provisions remained in place, founding president Sukarno (1945–67) removed both provisions from the final version of the constitution as well as Pancasila.⁶

Conservative Islamists were angered by Sukarno's last-minute constitutional turnabout, and many continued to harbor the desire to implement an Islamic state. While some Islamists like Sekarmadji Maridjan Kartosuwiryo sought this by leading a violent insurgency that lasted until 1962, most Islamists pursued this goal through democratic means during Indonesia's first postcolonial democratic period (1950–59). However, the insistent demand for the restoration of the Jakarta Charter eventually proved irreconcilable during the 1959 Constituent Assembly deliberations that sought to draft a new constitution.⁷ The assembly's failure to reach an agreement resulted in Sukarno's decree to dissolve it and marked the end of Indonesia's first democratic period.

Most conservative Islamists were then subjected to heavy political repression during the remainder of Sukarno's reign as well as that of his successor, Suharto (1967–98). Politicians affiliated with the Masyumi Party—an Islamic party that advocated both a democratic political system and an Islamic state—especially came under severe repression during both regimes, as their perceived ability to gather support from tens of millions of Indonesian Muslims was considered a threat. Suharto denied the request by Masyumi leader Mohammad Natsir, who endured long imprisonment under Sukarno's rule, to re-establish the party and instead approved a new Islamic party, handpicking many of its leaders.⁸

After his request was denied by Suharto, Natsir decided to form a new Islamic organization called the Indonesian Islamic Propagation

⁵ Robert E. Elson, "Another Look at the Jakarta Charter Controversy of 1945," *Indonesia*, no. 88 (2009): 108–18.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 119–26.

⁷ Adnan Buyung Nasution, *The Aspiration for Constitutional Government in Indonesia: A Socio-legal Study of the Indonesian Konstituante, 1956–1959* (Jakarta: Pustaka Sinar Harapan, 1992).

⁸ Robert W. Hefner, *Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 97–99.

Council (DDII). The organization is widely considered Indonesia's first modern Islamist organization and was known to portray Islam as under siege from the influence of Western liberalism, secularism, and capitalism. Natsir and DDII developed networks with like-minded Islamists from Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Kuwait, and other Middle Eastern countries to receive financial support from donors.⁹ The funds were used to provide scholarships for its junior cadres, some of whom went on to become leaders of other Islamist movements during the 1990s and the early 2000s. It also sponsored a news magazine called *Media Dakwah* (Propagation Media), which was widely known for promoting transnational Islamic solidarity, anti-Christian rhetoric, and other Islamist causes from the 1970s to 1990s.¹⁰ While DDII was eventually overshadowed by other Islamist groups after Reformasi (reform movement), it is still considered a pioneer Indonesian Islamist organization, since it was one of the few allowed to operate publicly during Suharto's long authoritarian rule.

Another tool DDII helped sponsor during the 1970s and 1980s was university campus preaching organizations, which gained traction as centers for Islamic propagation during a period when the number of middle-class university students rose significantly. The first campus preaching organization was founded in the late 1970s at the Bandung Institute of Technology's Salman Mosque.¹¹ Its proselytization combined literalist interpretations of Islamic texts and promotion of Islamic orthodoxy with concerns about contemporary sociopolitical issues and social activism, particularly social assistance for poor, urban residents.

This model was replicated by campus preaching organizations sponsored by other new Islamist groups that started to appear in Indonesia during the late 1970s and 1980s. The Tarbiyah (Nurture) movement, which was inspired by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, and HTI, which is the Indonesian branch of the transnational Hizb ut-Tahrir (Party of Liberation) movement, were two new Islamist movements that grew rapidly on university campuses during this time period. Both groups recruited new members through small, cell-like theological study groups that were tightly monitored by their leadership to screen out any potential infiltrators affiliated with the

⁹ Hefner, *Civil Islam*, 109.

¹⁰ Ibid., 111–13; and R. William Liddle, "Media Dakwah Scripturalism: One Form of Islamic Political Thought and Action in New Order Indonesia," in *Toward a New Paradigm: Recent Developments in Indonesian Islamic Thoughts*, ed. Mark Woodward (Tempe: Arizona State University Program for Southeast Asian Studies, 1996), 326–56.

¹¹ Hefner, *Civil Islam*, 121.

Suharto regime.¹² Consequently, both Tarbiyah- and HTI-affiliated campus preaching organizations are still able to attract more recruits from middle-class university students than those sponsored by NU and Muhammadiyah.

Another institute responsible for the propagation of conservative Islamism in Indonesia was the Indonesian Islamic and Arabic Studies Institute (LIPIA). Established in 1980 with financial support from the Saudi Arabian government, it immediately became a propagation center for the Saudi-influenced theologies of Wahhabism and Salafism. While several of its early graduates, like Ulil Abshar Abdalla, became proponents of moderate, even liberal, interpretations of Islam,¹³ many of its later graduates became known for their advocacy of Salafi-influenced Islamism.¹⁴ Some traditionalist-turned-Salafist activists, most notably Rizieq Shihab (founder and leader of FPI), first learned about Wahhabism and Salafism when they attended LIPIA during the 1980s and 1990s.

Many of the activities by conservative Islamists (of both modernist and traditionalist persuasions) were conducted quietly to escape possible repression by Suharto's security apparatus. Institutions like LIPIA officially labeled their Islam lessons as part of an "Arabic language and cultural studies center" in order to escape scrutiny, while campus propagation activities by the Tarbiyah movement, HTI, and other neo-Islamist groups were conducted underground. Although Suharto made further accommodations for conservative Islamic interests during the final decade of his rule, many of these groups—particularly Islamist ones—chose to remain underground until the May 1998 Reformasi uprising.

NEW ISLAMIST GROUPS IN POST-REFORMASI INDONESIA

The sudden fall of Suharto in May 1998 ushered in a rapid liberalization of Indonesia's social and political landscape. Under the leadership of his

¹² For further details on the inner workings of the Tarbiyah movement and HTI, see Yon Machmudi, *Islamising Indonesia: The Rise of Jemaah Tarbiyah and the Prosperous Justice Party* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2008); and Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman, *Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia and Political Islam: Identity, Ideology, and Religio-Political Mobilization* (Oxford: Routledge, 2018).

¹³ In 2000, Ulil became a co-founder of the Liberal Islam Network (Jaringan Islam Liberal, or JIL), an Islamic organization dedicated to promoting Islamic interpretation that is compatible with liberalism, secularism, and free market capitalism. JIL was condemned by a 2005 clerical opinion (*fatwa*) issued by MUI against "liberal, secular, and pluralist" interpretations of Islam and faded to obscurity a few years later.

¹⁴ Martin van Bruinessen, "Ghazwul Fikri or Arabization? Indonesian Muslim Responses to Globalization," in *Southeast Asian Muslims in the Era of Globalization*, ed. Ken Miichi and Omar Farouk (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 61–85.

last vice president, B.J. Habibie—who served as a caretaker president from May 1998 to August 1999—the country’s tightly controlled public sphere was immediately opened. New political parties (including those with Islamic ideological foundations), media, and civil-society organizations could now operate freely without facing any legal restrictions.

As a consequence, many of the new Islamist organizations previously operating underground during Suharto’s rule were now able to obtain legal recognition, proselytize, mobilize, and pursue sociopolitical advocacy without restrictions. The Tarbiyah movement incorporated itself as a political party under the Justice Party banner—later renamed the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS). Though PKS is now a political party, it also continues nonpolitical propagation and social activism through its affiliates, including the Indonesian Muslim Students Action Union (KAMMI), its university student youth wing.¹⁵ Meanwhile, HTI received legal recognition as a civil-society organization in 2000.¹⁶ Though it has spurned reorganizing itself as a political party, HTI quickly established a reputation as one of the most actively mobilized Islamist organizations in Indonesia through its frequent populist-themed protests calling for an end of corruption, socioeconomic justice, and the transformation of Indonesia from a Pancasila state to part of a transnational Islamic caliphate.

The increased number of new Islamist movements that incorporated during the early years of Reformasi created a new “marketplace of ideas” among Indonesian Muslims,¹⁷ where “previously suppressed and marginalized groups could promote different interpretations of Islamic theology, using innovative new media outlets.”¹⁸ These outlets include the internet and social media as well as physical outlets like mosques, campus preaching organizations, and community-based preaching groups (*majelis taklim*). Due to the existence of these different outlets and the wide variety of Islamic groups and preachers who utilize them, authority in Indonesian Islam is increasingly becoming fragmented. Muslims no longer primarily rely on NU and Muhammadiyah, the two largest Indonesian Islamic groups that are widely considered to articulate moderate theological and political

¹⁵ Alexander R. Arifianto, “Islamic Campus Preaching Organizations in Indonesia: Promoters of Moderation or Radicalism?” *Asian Security* 15, no. 3 (2019): 330.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Alexander R. Arifianto, “Rising Islamism and the Struggle for Islamic Authority in Post-Reformasi Indonesia,” *TRaNS: Trans-Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia* 8, no. 1 (2020): 39–41.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 39.

views. Instead, they can now seek and follow alternative sources of Islamic knowledge and prerogatives represented by new movements and preachers.¹⁹

In particular, Islamist groups are able to command the attention of millions of followers in Indonesia through the savvy utilization of the internet and social media as their primary propagation outlets. Until recently, NU and Muhammadiyah did “not engage much on the development of the digital platform,”²⁰ leaving the internet and social media-based proselytization in the hands of their conservative and hard-line Islamist rivals.²¹ Both groups still prefer to engage with Muslim youths through face-to-face interaction, while much of their online media activities are targeted at audiences who are already NU or Muhammadiyah members and aim to build up the groups’ respective identities among youth.²² In contrast, Islamist groups and preachers use the internet not only as a recruitment tool but also to build their own identities and develop autonomous institutions, where they receive popular recognition as “new” Islamic authorities, despite not being considered as proper “experts” by more established ulama.²³ Several Islamist preachers have commanded millions of Instagram followers. The three with the most followers are Hanan Attaki (8.3 million), Abdullah Gymnastiar (5.9 million), and Felix Siauw (4.7 million), which indicates their popular appeal, especially among millennial-generation Indonesian Muslims.²⁴ They are enabling a “pluralization of religious authority” that shifts influence away from established Islamic groups such as NU and Muhammadiyah toward new Islamist groups and preachers.²⁵

NU and Muhammadiyah do not just face competition from new Islamist organizations like PKS, HTI, and FPI. Their authority as interpreters of Islamic doctrine (*aqidah*) is also challenged by MUI. Originally founded by Suharto in 1975, MUI has reinvented itself during the Reformasi era by changing its designation from the “guardian of the state” to the “guardian

¹⁹ This process is further elaborated in Peter Mandaville, “Globalization and the Politics of Knowledge: Pluralizing Authority in the Muslim World,” *Theory, Culture, and Society* 24, no. 2 (2007): 101–15.

²⁰ Wahyudi Akmaliah, “The Demise of Moderate Islam: New Media, Contestation, and Reclaiming Religious Authorities,” *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 10, no. 1 (2020): 1.

²¹ This can be seen in a ranking of the most popular Indonesian Islamic preachers, where the top six preachers with the most Instagram followers are those considered to have conservative Islamist leanings—for instance, Abdul Somad, Hanan Attaki, Felix Siauw, and Adi Hidayat. See *ibid.*, 15.

²² *Ibid.*, 17–20.

²³ Martin Slama, “A Subtle Economy of Time: Social Media and the Transformation of Indonesia’s Islamic Preacher Economy,” *Economic Anthropology* 4, no. 1 (2017): 95.

²⁴ The data on the Instagram followers of these preachers was calculated by the author on October 3, 2020.

²⁵ Slama, “A Subtle Economy of Time,” 102.

of the Muslim community,” thereby proclaiming itself as a protector and promoter of Islamic theological orthodoxy in Indonesia.²⁶

Beginning with Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono’s presidency (2004–14), MUI started to play a more assertive role to become the primary interpreter of Islamic doctrine in Indonesia by issuing clerical opinions (*fatwas*). While fatwas are not considered legally binding, national and local authorities are increasingly willing to enforce MUI-issued fatwas and codify them into regulations. Indonesian politicians, in turn, are more willing to enact these regulations to secure electoral support from prospective Muslim voters, which form the majority population in most localities.²⁷ Starting with the Yudhoyono administration, the government has deliberately favored fatwas issued by MUI over those issued by other Islamic organizations, thereby diminishing the fatwa-making authority of NU and Muhammadiyah.²⁸ In addition, Indonesia’s regional autonomy law—which took effect in 2001—gives broad lawmaking authority to local governments, including on religious affairs. While technically the national government has the power to overrule these local regulations (*peraturan daerah* or *perda*), it has largely chosen not to do so,²⁹ likely because it does not wish to antagonize conservative Islamist groups and voters.

Since 2005, MUI has issued fatwas condemning secularism and liberalism (directed against Jaringan Islam Liberal and other progressive Islamic groups), Ahmadi Muslim minorities, and the LGBTQ community.³⁰ Many of these fatwas were further codified by the national and regional governments to become legal justification for ministerial decrees, court rulings, regional regulations, and regional decrees and circulars. These local regulations have codified MUI fatwas to restrict the rights of religious minorities such

²⁶ Syafiq Hasyim, “Fatwas and Democracy: Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI, Indonesian Ulama Council) and Rising Conservatism in Indonesian Islam,” *TRaNS: Trans-Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia* 8, no. 1 (2020): 23.

²⁷ Melissa Crouch, “Religious Regulations in Indonesia: Falling Vulnerable Groups?” *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs* 43, no. 2 (2009): 53–103; and Michael Buehler, *The Politics of Shari’a Law: Islamist Activists and the State in Democratizing Indonesia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

²⁸ Marcus Mietzner and Burhanuddin Muhtadi, “Explaining the 2016 Islamist Mobilisation in Indonesia: Religious Intolerance, Militant Groups and the Politics of Accommodation,” *Asian Studies Review* 42, no. 3 (2018): 484–85.

²⁹ Melissa Crouch, “Law and Religion in Indonesia: The Constitutional Court and the Blasphemy Law,” *Asian Journal of Comparative Law* 7, no. 1 (2012): 10.

³⁰ For further details on these fatwas, see Piers Gillespie, “Current Issues in Indonesian Islam: Analysing the 2005 Council of Indonesian Ulama Fatwa No. 7 Opposing Pluralism, Liberalism and Secularism,” *Journal of Islamic Studies* 18, no. 2 (2007): 202–40; and Saskia Schäfer, “Democratic Decline in Indonesia: The Role of Religious Authorities,” *Pacific Affairs* 92, no. 2 (2019): 235–55.

as Ahmadi and Shia Muslims.³¹ It is estimated that as of 2019, there were 770 local Islamic regulations, and each of Indonesia's 34 provinces and 533 regencies or cities has enacted at least one such regulation.³²

While most Indonesian Muslims still express widespread support for a secular nationalist state and its ideology Pancasila, a growing number support the implementation of sharia law as a legal foundation—at least at the regional level. A 2017 survey found that 39% of respondents believe that sharia law should be enacted as a legal principle governing all Indonesians at the national level, while 41% believe it should be enacted at the regional level.³³ The increased public support for regional Islamic regulations creates incentives for regional executives and local legislators to enact similar regulations to secure their electoral prospects, leading to a proliferation of statutes within the past fifteen years.

MODERATE ISLAM UNDER ATTACK

Prior to 2005, NU and Muhammadiyah had autonomous fatwa-making authority, including on Islamic theological matters. Afterward, however, MUI began to declare itself as a “quasi-state-mufti” institution.³⁴ It claimed authority over Islam that was largely accepted by numerous national and regional state actors due to the perceived “moral superiority” of its clerics (who are largely drawn from NU and Muhammadiyah ranks) and the lack of other state institutions that could contest its claim of legitimacy over Islamic affairs.³⁵

NU and Muhammadiyah are still able to issue their own fatwas. Their rulings—particularly those related to Ahmadi and Shia minorities—are considered to have softer language than those issued by MUI.³⁶ Nonetheless, they largely must defer to fatwas issued by MUI when it comes to doctrine

³¹ Some of these local perdas were enacted under pressure from conservative and hard-line Islamist groups, which use MUI fatwas as a justification to enact restrictive regulations against minorities. For instance, see the case of the perda issued by Cianjur Regency outlined in Ratno Lukito, “Islamisation as Legal Intolerance: The Case of GARIS in Cianjur, West Java,” *Al-Jami'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies* 54, no. 2 (2016): 393–425.

³² Amanda Hodge, “Sharia Spread by Stealth,” *Australian*, October 9, 2019 ~ <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/inquirer/sharia-spread-by-stealth-across-indonesia/news-story/172d67b018ae846bbe0aaedd6b7c31499>.

³³ Diego Fossati, Hui Yew-Foong, and Siwage Dharma Negara, *The Indonesian National Survey Project: Economy, Society, and Politics* (Singapore: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2017).

³⁴ Schäfer, “Democratic Decline in Indonesia,” 242.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 244.

³⁶ The author would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

and matters of blasphemy, since the state's favor has effectively given this organization a de facto monopoly power to issue fatwas on these matters.³⁷ This is a significant loss of authority for NU and Muhammadiyah.³⁸

Another factor that has eroded the authority of the two moderate Islamic organizations is the increasing competition from newer Islamist movements and preachers, as well as increasing internal dissent and infighting over theological and political matters as some clerics and activists have become influenced by more conservative interpretations advocated by the Islamist-oriented groups. This can be clearly seen within Muhammadiyah, which over the past decade has had many of its members leave to join PKS, HTI, and various Salafi groups. According to a 2019 survey, only 5% of Indonesian Muslims (approximately 12 million) self-identify as Muhammadiyah followers—far below the 30 million figure often claimed by the organization's leaders.³⁹

Even those who stay on as members often express sympathy toward Islamist-leaning positions. The threat of competition from these Islamist groups led to a decree issued by the Muhammadiyah leadership board in 2006. It obligated all Muhammadiyah followers to “free themselves of any kind of external infiltration and political activity, and to show loyalty, integrity, and commitment to Muhammadiyah.”⁴⁰ The decree was targeted at PKS, which was then making inroads among Muhammadiyah followers and was often accused of infiltrating mosques, schools, and hospitals run by the organization. In 2015, Muhammadiyah also renamed its ideology Islam Berkemajuan (Islam with Progress), which emphasizes the compatibility of Islamic principles with Indonesian nationalism and scientific knowledge.⁴¹

However, despite Muhammadiyah's decree calling for loyalty from its followers, the group continues to lose many of its members to other organizations with Islamist theological leanings. Most recently, Muhammadiyah leaders debated the extent to which Salafism has infiltrated the organization, evidenced by the number of followers who dress up and

³⁷ Hasyim, “Fatwas and Democracy,” 26.

³⁸ Author's interview with KH Saleh Badaruddin, founder of Ngalah Pesantren (NU-affiliated), in Pasuruan, East Java, December 1, 2016.

³⁹ Marcus Mietzner and Burhanuddin Muhtadi, “The Myth of Pluralism: Nahdlatul Ulama and the Politics of Religious Tolerance in Indonesia,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 42, no. 1 (2020): 71.

⁴⁰ Ahmad Najib Burhani, “Pluralism, Liberalism, and Islamism: Religious Outlook of Muhammadiyah,” *Studia Islamika* 25, no. 3 (2018): 452.

⁴¹ Alexander R. Arifianto, “Islam with Progress: Muhammadiyah and Moderation in Islam,” S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Commentary, November 10, 2017 ~ <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/co17213-islam-with-progress-muhammadiyah-and-moderation-in-islam/#.XzQkpuhKiUk>.

follow Salafi rituals within Muhammadiyah-affiliated institutions and functions.⁴² In South Sulawesi Province, many Muhammadiyah followers have left the organization and joined Wahdah Islamiyah—a quasi-Salafi Islamist organization that has rapidly gained members and support from local politicians less than two decades after it was established.⁴³ Hence, while Muhammadiyah leaders have condemned attempts by Islamist organizations to poach followers away, attempts to discourage Muhammadiyah followers from joining these new groups have been ineffective. The Muhammadiyah leadership's position that it is a religious but not a political organization seems to be motivating its followers to join Islamist organizations instead, since their mission to promote Islam as both a religion and political ideology is more overt.⁴⁴

NU also faces stronger competition from the aforementioned Islamist groups along with infighting within its own ranks on whether it should remain a politically moderate Islamic organization or should take a more Islamist turn in its political position. The PKS youth wing—the Islamic Muslim Students Action Union—and HTI have engaged in nationwide recruitment campaigns on the campuses of state universities. Many university students, including those from an NU background, are attracted to these groups because their egalitarian structures have allowed younger members to advance through the ranks relatively quickly. This is in contrast to NU-sponsored student groups that tend to promote children of NU clerics and activists to leadership positions.⁴⁵ Favoritism toward sons and daughters of NU clerics (known as “blue bloods”) is a long-standing custom within the organization that has been recognized by some scholars to be a less democratic feature of NU.⁴⁶ Yet, the practice still permeates deep inside the organization and its numerous affiliated institutions to this day.⁴⁷

⁴² Biyanto, “Menyikapi tren Salafisme di Muhammadiyah” [Responding to the Salafism Trend in Muhammadiyah], PWMU, September 16, 2019 ~ <https://pwmu.co/109426/09/16/menyikapi-tren-salafisme-di-muhammadiyah>.

⁴³ Andar Nubowo, “Indonesian Hybrid-Salafism: Wahdah Islamiyah’s Rise, Ideology, and Utopia,” in *Rising Islamic Conservatism in Indonesia: Islamic Groups and Identity Politics*, ed. Leonard C. Sebastian, Syafiq Hasyim, and Alexander R. Arifianto (Oxford: Routledge, 2021), 182–86.

⁴⁴ Burhani, “Pluralism, Liberalism, and Islamism,” 451.

⁴⁵ Arifianto, “Islamic Campus Preaching Organizations,” 331.

⁴⁶ Martin van Bruinessen, *NU: Tradisi, relasi-relasi kuasa, pencarian wacana baru* [NU: Tradition, Power Relations, the Search for a New Discourse] (Yogyakarta: Penerbit LKiS, 1994).

⁴⁷ Most NU reformers who transformed the organization to embrace moderate norms like democracy and religious tolerance during the 1980s—including Abdurrahman Wahid, Mustofa Bisri, and Masdar Mas’udi—also came from “blue blood” family backgrounds. See Robin Bush, *Nahdlatul Ulama and the Struggle for Power within Islam and Politics in Indonesia* (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2009), 69–70.

Many NU youths are also attracted to Hizb ut-Tahrir because Yusuf al-Nabhani, the grandfather of its founder Taquiuddin al-Nabhani, was a renowned Islamic teacher who taught NU founder Hasyim Asy'ari in Mecca in the 1890s.⁴⁸ Hence, under traditional Islamic custom of revering highly esteemed clerics and their descendants, Taquiuddin al-Nabhani can be considered as a figure worthy of respect by NU followers (though not necessarily one to be obeyed). Meanwhile, in an increasingly fierce electoral environment, PKS has managed to recruit some children of NU clerics who want to run for national and regional legislative offices in NU-dominant provinces like East Java away from the National Awakening Party (PKB), which is NU's semi-official political party.⁴⁹ This has raised tensions between the two organizations, especially during the 2019 presidential election campaign.

However, the most serious challenge to NU and its moderate leadership comes from within its own ranks. A new faction called NU Garis Lurus (Straight Path NU) was founded in 2015, dedicating itself to overturning the moderate norms of religious tolerance and pluralism introduced by the late Abdurrahman Wahid that have been promoted by many (but not all) NU leaders and key figures for nearly four decades. Straight Path NU wishes to “return NU followers to the pure teachings of Hasyim Asy'ari, which are Sunni, Shafite, anti-secularism, anti-pluralism, and anti-liberalism.”⁵⁰ It was founded by Luthfi Bashori, Idrus Ramli, and Buya Yahya—junior clerics who obtained theological training in the Middle East and command millions of followers both in person and on social media.⁵¹

Ideological factionalism is not new within NU. Over the past few decades, different conservative clerics within the organization have challenged the authority of its moderate leadership. However, what differentiates Straight Path NU from these previous challenges is its ability to use the internet and social media to construct an “authentic NU frame” that challenges the moderate theological discourse and narrative presented by the organization's leadership

⁴⁸ Fahmi Anhar, “Sanad dalam sains Islami” [Credential in Islamic Science], *Media Umat*, August 9, 2017  <https://mediaumat.news/sanad-dalam-sains-islami>. HTI recruiters use a traditionalist Islamic principle called “Ta’lim al-Muta’allim” (honor your teacher and their descendants) to convince prospective converts from an NU background to join HTI.

⁴⁹ Yon Machmudi, “PKS and Tarbiyah Movement: Its Agenda and Future in Indonesia,” in Sebastian, Hasyim, and Arifianto, *Rising Islamic Conservatism in Indonesia*, 166–67.

⁵⁰ Asep M. Iqbal, “Challenging Moderate Islam in Indonesia: NU Garis Lurus and Its Construction of ‘the Authentic NU’ Online,” in Sebastian, Hasyim, and Arifianto, *Rising Islamic Conservatism in Indonesia*, 99.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 98.

and appeals to followers from the millennial generation.⁵² Furthermore, it is not the only conservative group within NU that has challenged the moderate ideology of the organization. For instance, Pesantren Sidogiri, a large Islamic boarding school affiliated with NU in Pasuruan, East Java, has long propagated Islamist theological views to its pupils.⁵³ It has promoted anti-Shia ideology and considers Shia'ism "a deviant form of Islam."⁵⁴ More significantly, the pesantren has declared its opposition to the Islam Nusantara ideology introduced under KH Said Aqil Siradj's NU chairmanship and published a book entitled *Sidogiri nenolak pemikiran KH Said Aqil Siradj* (Sidogiri Rejects KH Said Aqil Siradj's Thoughts).⁵⁵ The book's publication marks Sidogiri as another conservative Islamist faction within the NU that has openly challenged the theological vision promoted by its leadership. Hence, Straight Path NU's challenge is not coming from "a loose grouping of young NU clerics who challenge the leadership of the current NU chairman."⁵⁶ Instead, it is a growing challenge from the conservative Islamist faction within NU that appeals to a new generation of internet-savvy pupils that should be taken seriously by the organization's leadership.

NU has responded to the ideological challenge from within and without its ranks by promoting Islam Nusantara, which it unveiled in 2015.⁵⁷ Islam Nusantara situates NU's interpretation of Islam as one that is grounded not only in authentic Islamic teachings prior to the dominance of Wahhabism and other forms of Islamism but also in Indonesia's unique historical and sociocultural experiences. Proponents within NU argue that Islam Nusantara is "an antidote to religious extremism and radicalism and an alternative model of authentic Islam that can be followed by other Muslims everywhere."⁵⁸ From the onset, however, Islam Nusantara has been contested not by both conservative Islamist groups and other traditionalist Islamic clerics who

⁵² Iqbal, "Challenging Moderate Islam in Indonesia," 95–97.

⁵³ *Pesantren* is the Indonesian term for an Islamic boarding school.

⁵⁴ Minako Sakai and M. Falikul Isbah, "Limits to Religious Diversity Practice in Indonesia: Case Studies from Religious Philanthropic Institutions and Traditional Islamic Schools," *Asian Journal of Social Science* 42, no. 6 (2014): 737.

⁵⁵ Yuka Kayane, "Understanding Sunni-Shi'a Sectarianism in Contemporary Indonesia: A Different Voice from Nahdlatul Ulama under Pluralist Leadership," *Indonesia and the Malay World* 48, no. 140 (2020): 90.

⁵⁶ Iqbal, "Challenging Moderate Islam in Indonesia," 98.

⁵⁷ A common definition of Nusantara is the maritime Southeast Asia archipelago consisting of Indonesia, Malaysia, southern Thailand, the Philippines, Singapore, Brunei, and Timor-Leste. A narrower definition largely developed in Indonesia includes only the present-day Indonesian archipelago.

⁵⁸ Ahmad Najib Burhani, *Islam Nusantara as a Promising Response to Religious Intolerance and Radicalism* (Singapore: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2018).

are affiliated with NU. For instance, the West Sumatra provincial branch of MUI has issued a fatwa condemning Islam Nusantara on the ground that it is “trying to formulate a ‘new religion’” and may “erode the perfectness of Islam.”⁵⁹ Islam Nusantara also faces strong resistance in East Java Province, one of NU’s main bastions. In the Pamekasan region, the local NU branch is vehemently opposed to the ideology and forbids members of NU’s national leadership, including its chairman, to visit the region.⁶⁰

In summary, both NU and Muhammadiyah have faced serious erosion of authority in the post-Reformasi period as their power to issue theological fatwas on behalf of their respective communities has been superseded by MUI. Both organizations are facing increased competition from new Islamist groups amid infighting and factionalism from within their respective communities over whether they should continue advocating moderate theological positions or instead pursue hard-line positions advocated by many of the Islamist groups. While NU has reinvented its moderate theological principles as Islam Nusantara—and Muhammadiyah has done the same through its Islam Berkemajuan ideology—both still face strong resistance from factions calling for a conservative Islamist direction. To fight against external competition and internal dissent, NU is pursuing a strategic alliance with the Jokowi government to support its effort to crack down on conservative Islamism in Indonesia.

THE JOKOWI GOVERNMENT’S POLICY AGAINST ISLAMISM

Facing the challenge of conservative Islamism during the 2016 Defending Islam rallies as well as during the 2019 presidential election, Jokowi decided to pursue a two-pronged strategy of co-optation and coercion against Islamist groups. As part of his co-optation strategy, Jokowi allowed the prosecution of former Jakarta governor Ahok for religious blasphemy to proceed, resulting in his eventual two-year conviction and imprisonment.⁶¹ Realizing that to win re-election, he needed a landslide victory in East and Central Java Provinces—the two most populous provinces in Indonesia, and both overwhelmingly populated by NU adherents—Jokowi forged an

⁵⁹ Syafiq Hasyim, “‘Islam Nusantara’ and Its Discontents,” RSIS, Commentary, August 8, 2018 ~ <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/co18134-islam-nusantara-and-its-discontents>.

⁶⁰ Author’s interview with the vice chairman of NU Pamekasan district branch in Pamekasan, East Java, October 14, 2017.

⁶¹ Marcus Mietzner, “Fighting Illiberalism with Illiberalism: Islamist Population and Democratic Deconsolidation in Indonesia,” *Pacific Affairs* 91, no. 2 (2018): 274.

electoral alliance with NU and nominated Ma'ruf Amin, the organization's supreme leader and also then MUI chairman, to become his vice presidential nominee.⁶² Jokowi appointed Ma'ruf because he was widely considered a prominent conservative cleric and was a primary force behind MUI fatwas against liberal Muslims, Ahmadis, and the LGBTQ community, in addition to having declared Ahok guilty of religious blasphemy.⁶³ Jokowi hoped that Ma'ruf's appointment would entice some conservative Islamists to support his re-election. However, it failed to entice much support from these groups, and most remained firmly behind Prabowo's candidacy.

Nevertheless, Ma'ruf's nomination did solidify NU support for Jokowi and made NU the president's most important Islamic ally in his re-election campaign. To sweeten the deal, Jokowi promised several policies to help NU and its primarily low-middle-income followers. This included the introduction of a new pesantren bill to channel billions of dollars in state funds to approximately 29,000 NU pesantrens. The bill was passed into law in September 2019.⁶⁴ Jokowi also promised the redistribution of unused state land to NU pesantrens and support for sharia-based banking and small and medium-sized enterprises geared toward low-income Muslim entrepreneurs. These strategies paid off handsomely for Jokowi as an overwhelming number of the East and Central Java electorates voted to support his re-election, assuring his victory.⁶⁵

Given that the co-optation strategy failed to bring much support from conservative Islamists, Jokowi unleashed the state's coercive law enforcement and criminal justice apparatus to bring criminal charges against FPI founder Rizieq Shihab and other key leaders of the Defending Islam rallies. Facing a barrage of criminal charges, Rizieq left Indonesia for self-imposed exile in Saudi Arabia, where he remains to this day.⁶⁶ The Jokowi government also revoked HTI's legal recognition and declared it to be an unlawful organization, thereby prohibiting the pro-caliphate group from legally

⁶² Greg Fealy, "Ma'ruf Amin: Jokowi's Islamic Defender or Deadweight?" *New Mandala*, August 28, 2018 ~ <https://www.newmandala.org/maruf-amin-jokowis-islamic-defender-deadweight>.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Rakhmad Hidayatulloh Permana, "Kontroversi UU pesantren: Kitab kuning dan dana abadi" [Controversy over the Pesantren Law: "Yellow Scriptures" and Endowment Fund], *detikNews*, September 24, 2019 ~ <https://news.detik.com/berita/d-4719881/kontroversi-uu-pesantren-kitab-kuning-dan-dana-abadi>.

⁶⁵ Thomas Pepinsky, "Islam and Indonesia's 2019 Presidential Election," *Asia Policy* 14, no. 4 (2019): 58.

⁶⁶ Mietzner, "Fighting Illiberalism with Illiberalism," 275–76.

operating in Indonesia.⁶⁷ Last, it utilized the assistance of Ansor—NU’s youth militia wing—to forcefully disrupt and disband public gatherings sponsored by various Islamist groups such as FPI and HTI,⁶⁸ as well as religious activities sponsored by popular Islamist preachers like Felix Siauw and Hanan Attaki.⁶⁹

These coercive strategies against conservative Islamist groups have come under severe criticism. Indonesia scholar Marcus Mietzner has assailed the strategy to curtail the freedom of expression of groups like HTI and bypass the court system, which was empowered to issue prohibitions against such groups under Law No. 17/2013 on civil-society organizations. However, this law was hastily revoked and replaced with an emergency decree allowing the state to speedily ban any organization that violates Pancasila or the 1945 Indonesian constitution without any legal recourse.⁷⁰ Other scholars have also criticized the Jokowi regime’s hard-hitting measures to silence its critics—Islamists or otherwise—by invoking illiberal laws such as Law No. 11/2008 on electronic information and transactions. The law is frequently used to prosecute those who criticize the government via the internet and social media on the grounds that they spread “fake news” and “hoaxes” that threaten to “polarize” Indonesian society.⁷¹ NU’s close alliance with the Jokowi government has been severely criticized by its own activists, who accuse the organization of blindly following an increasingly authoritarian regime and apparently forgetting its critical “check-and-balance” mission as an independent civil-society group.⁷²

As Jokowi commenced his second (and final) five-year term in October 2019, retired general Fachrul Razi—his newly appointed religious affairs minister—had plans to introduce new regulations to further restrict the activities of conservative Islamist groups. They included proposals

⁶⁷ Alexander R. Arifianto, “Banning Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia: Freedom or Security?” RSIS, Commentary, May 18, 2017 ~ <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/co17099-banning-hizbut-tahrir-indonesia-freedom-or-security>.

⁶⁸ Mietzner, “Fighting Illiberalism with Illiberalism,” 276.

⁶⁹ Haris Prabowo, “GP Ansor tolak Felix Siauw: Dakwah mesti dihadapi dengan dakwah” [GP Ansor Rejects Felix Siauw: Da’wa Should Have Been Countered with Da’wa], Tirta, June 28, 2019 ~ <https://tirta.id/gp-ansor-tolak-felix-siauw-dakwah-mesti-dihadapi-dengan-dakwah-dl35>; and M. Rosseno Aji, “GP Ansor tegur pengurus Tegal yang keberatan seramah Hanan Attaki” [GP Ansor Reprimands Its Tegal Board Which Objects to Hanan Attaki’s Sermon], *Tempo*, July 8, 2019 ~ <https://nasional.tempo.co/read/1222315/gp-ansor-tegur-pengurus-tegal-yang-keberatan-ceramah-hanan-attaki>.

⁷⁰ Mietzner, “Fighting Illiberalism with Illiberalism,” 277.

⁷¹ Thomas P. Power, “Jokowi’s Authoritarian Turn and Indonesia’s Democratic Decline,” *Bulletin of Indonesian Economic Studies* 54, no. 3 (2018): 307–38; and Eve Warburton and Edward Aspinall, “Explaining Indonesia’s Democratic Regression: Structure, Agency and Popular Opinion,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 41, no. 2 (2019): 255–85.

⁷² Lailatu Fitriyah, “Islam di Indonesia: Antara ‘Islam konservatif’ dan ‘Islam pemerintahan’” [Islam in Indonesia: Between “Conservative Islam” and “Statist Islam”], *IndoPROGRESS*, July 26, 2019 ~ <https://indoprogress.com/2019/07/islam-di-indonesia-antara-islam-konservatif-dan-islam-pemerintahan>.

calling for all Friday service sermons to be screened and approved by the government prior to delivery as well as for mandatory registration of community-based Islamic study groups (*majelis taklim*) to prevent them from inviting “radical” Islamist preachers as speakers. Such measures have been criticized for introducing “heavy-handed measures commonly used by Middle Eastern governments to clamp down on the perceived threat from hard-line Islamists.”⁷³

However, further plans to enact and implement these regulations have been postponed indefinitely due to the Covid-19 pandemic, as the priority has shifted to the more urgent task of safeguarding Indonesia’s fragile public health and economic systems from the pandemic’s impacts. While it is unclear if (or when) these measures will be brought up by the government again, they would surely provoke further concerns regarding Indonesia’s declining democracy and the erosion of civil rights guaranteed by the 1945 constitution such as freedom of expression and freedom of religion.

CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Recent episodes of Islamist activism in Indonesia did not arise out of nowhere. There are groups that have called for national governance to be based strictly on conservative Islamic principles since the country’s founders declared independence in 1945. Authoritarian rule by Sukarno and Suharto constrained the ability of various Islamist groups to promote themselves in the public sphere. Suharto also repressed moderate activists belonging to NU and Muhammadiyah by using coercive tactics during the early 1980s to force these groups to adopt Pancasila as their sole ideological principle,⁷⁴ a prominent example of the regime’s willingness to repress any group it perceived as a threat to its survival. However, within the limited public sphere that was allowed to exist during this time period, moderate Islamic voices—articulated by intellectuals such as Abdurrahman Wahid and Nurcholish Madjid—dominated writings and speeches regularly published in prominent Indonesian media outlets such as *Kompas* newspaper and *Tempo* magazine. Their sermons were regularly attended by tens of thousands

⁷³ Prashanth Parameswaran, “Interview: Indonesian Politics during Jokowi’s Second Term,” *Diplomat*, March 10, 2020 ~ <https://thediplomat.com/2020/03/interview-indonesian-politics-during-jokowis-second-term>.

⁷⁴ For further accounts on this, see Bush, *Nahdlatul Ulama and the Struggle for Power within Islam and Politics in Indonesia*, 65–78; and Hefner, *Civil Islam*, 85–92, 97–101.

of Indonesians.⁷⁵ NU and Muhammadiyah were also allowed to continue their proselytization activities and received financial assistance for the Islamic schools and social welfare activities (e.g., health clinics and private schools) they operated.

However, conservative and hard-line Islamists were also active during the Suharto period, though they remained underground. They focused their activism on Islamic propagation and education and kept activities within small groups of loyal cadres to escape the regime's surveillance. The political freedoms ushered in after the fall of the Suharto regime have allowed Islamist voices to emerge from hiding, enabling them to obtain legal recognition and compete on par with the moderates. During two decades of Reformasi, conservatives have made significant inroads to promote their theological and political visions through channels such as campus propagation, community-level proselytization, the internet, and social media. Having well-placed allies among politicians, security officials, and the clerical establishment, MUI has also helped leverage their vision against the moderate groups.

Meanwhile, NU and Muhammadiyah have suffered setbacks in their authority as MUI has now taken over the ability to make doctrinal rulings on behalf of the Indonesian Muslim community. Both organizations are facing external competition from new Islamist groups as well as growing internal factionalism among their own clerics and activists who have challenged the moderate ideas long promoted by NU and Muhammadiyah and sought to replace them with more Islamist ones. To deal with these challenges, NU has pursued an alliance with the Jokowi government in order to restore the ideological hegemony it once commanded and secure much-needed financial resources for its leaders and activists. However, this alliance comes at a cost of compromising the group's ideas of democracy and tolerance as the Jokowi administration increasingly pursues a repressive approach against conservative Islamists with the assistance of elements within NU that eagerly participate.

As an alternative to pursuing an alliance with moderate groups like NU for purely political gains, the Jokowi administration should support efforts

⁷⁵ Recently, a new generation of moderate Islamic intellectuals have begun to criticize the complacency of some of these Muslim intellectuals—particularly Madjid—in cooperating with Suharto through regime-sponsored forums such as the Indonesian Muslim Intellectuals Association and other regime-sanctioned outlets. For instance, Syafiq Hasyim writes that “Madjid’s efforts to promote neo-modernist Islam failed because moderate Islamic groups became too dependent on state support, losing their credibility among many ordinary Muslims.” Syafiq Hasyim, “Epilogue: Conservative Islam and the Dilemma of Indonesian Democracy,” in Sebastian, Hasyim, and Arifianto, *Rising Islamic Conservatism in Indonesia*, 219.

by both NU and Muhammadiyah to promote their visions of moderate Islam as represented by Islam Nusantara and Islam Berkemajuan ideologies. It should also ensure that all Indonesian citizens—irrespective of their ethnicity or religious beliefs—are treated equally by the state and have their civil and political rights respected, including the right to serve in and contest public office. It should revoke local Islamic regulations that discriminate against religious minorities on the grounds that they violate the religious freedom guaranteed by the Indonesian constitution. NU and Muhammadiyah should increase their engagement to promote their moderate Islamic visions in the public sphere—particularly among millennial-generation Muslims—through the internet, social media, and proselytization on university campuses.

Given that Indonesia is the largest Muslim-majority country in the world and is geostrategically important in Asia, recent developments related to the growing influence of conservative and hard-line Islamism are of utmost importance to policymakers, especially those in the United States. Though it might be tempting for Western government agencies (for example, the Pentagon, USAID, and their equivalent counterparts) to consider providing financial assistance to both the Jokowi government and moderate groups such as NU and Muhammadiyah in their struggle to contain Islamism in Indonesia, doing so would be counterproductive. Conservatives and hard-liners would perceive such actions as intervention by Western powers to support their “liberal Islamic” allies and try to promote such ideas among Indonesian Muslims in order to counter the moderates. The ideological and political struggle against Islamists is best left to these moderate groups, which already have authority and credibility among the Indonesian Muslim community, as well as the financial resources to conduct such advocacy on their own terms. It is also best done through persuasive dialogue and ideational competition within the Indonesian Muslim community rather than through the use of coercive and repressive state measures to force Islamist groups back into obscurity. ◆