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The 2024 Indonesian Presidential Election: Islam as a Decisive Factor?

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SYNOPSIS

*Similar to the previous two elections, Islam is expected to play a significant role during the 2024 Indonesian presidential race. However, Islamic groups and activists are divided by various ideological and political allegiances. Such divisions, according to **ALEXANDER R. ARIFANTO**, force all prospective candidates to strategise and campaign hard to win the endorsement of a wide range of clerics, preachers and Islamic organisations.*

COMMENTARY

Over the past two decades, Indonesia — the largest Muslim-majority democracy in the world — has experienced a resurgence of [Islamic conservatism](#). This has contributed to increasing contestation over religious authority as the dominance of mainstream religious organisations is challenged by dozens of [new Islamic organisations](#) with transnational linkages. Traditional Islamic clerics (*kyai*) are also being challenged by the rise of charismatic preachers (*ustadz*) who command [strong social media followings](#), especially among those 40 years of age or younger.

As of today, two presidential hopefuls — Prabowo Subianto and Anies Baswedan — have formally declared their candidacies. Meanwhile, the candidacy of Central Java governor Ganjar Pranowo, which is probably backed by incumbent president Joko Widodo, is still up in the air. This is because the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P) [is still deliberating](#) whether to nominate Ganjar or Puan Maharani — speaker of the House of Representatives (DPR) and daughter of the party chair, Megawati Soekarnoputri.



The provision of social services such as boarding schools and free medical activities are a key aspect of the work of Islamic groups in Indonesia. *Photo by Mufid Majnun on Unsplash.*

Given their religious influence and ability to mobilise supporters to vote for their preferred candidates, the endorsements of prominent Indonesian *kyai*, *ustadz* and other religious leaders are considered crucial [to strengthen the legitimacy](#) of political candidates, particularly presidential aspirants. It is widely expected that all prospective candidates in the 2024 contest will be actively courting these various Islamic personalities and organisations.

Nahdlatul Ulama: Divided in its Support

Indonesian Islamic groups are constantly jockeying for position in [the highly competitive religious marketplace](#), looking to place themselves in the most beneficial political positions. For instance, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Indonesia's largest Islamic organisation, [has aligned itself closely](#) with the Jokowi administration since 2014. NU played an instrumental role in convincing Jokowi to prohibit groups like Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) (in 2017) and the Islamic Defenders Front (in 2020), which in the view of NU leaders were trying [to replace the Indonesian state](#) with some version of an Islamic state. In return, [NU enjoys significant favours](#) from the Jokowi administration, as seen in the appointment of its senior cleric Ma'ruf Amin as vice president, the former chairman of NU's youth paramilitary wing, Yaqut Cholil Qoumas, as minister of religious affairs, and three other NU-affiliated members as cabinet ministers.

NU was also recently tasked to be the lead organiser of [Religion 20 \(R20\)](#), a conference of global interfaith religious leaders held in conjunction with the G20 summit hosted by Indonesia. Since all senior organiser positions for the conference were occupied by NU leaders and activists, it sent the message that NU is trusted by

the Jokowi administration [to showcase Indonesia](#) as a moderate and pluralist Muslim-majority nation on the international stage.

However, NU is [a highly decentralised organisation](#), with its affiliated *kyai* having broad discretion to interpret Islamic teachings and to lend their endorsement to any politician running for elected office, including presidential candidates. Its leaders are also divided by personal rivalries and [conflicting political allegiances](#). This means that different factions within the organisation are likely to back different candidates, depending on their individual political interests and personal networks.

This can be seen in the preferences of NU elites who are backing different presidential candidates. Given his close alignment with Jokowi, current NU general chairperson Yahya Staquf will back Ganjar. However, the National Awakening Party (PKB), NU's semi-official political party, is currently [backing Prabowo](#). This is because Muhaimin Iskandar, the party chairman, comes from a rival NU faction. To gather more support, Prabowo has [paid visits](#) to large NU Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) based in Magelang (Central Java) and Jombang (East Java).

Since NU has an estimated 90 million followers, most of whom reside in the electorally important Central and East Java provinces, all presidential candidates — [Ganjar](#), [Puan](#), [Anies](#) and Prabowo — are seeking the endorsement of grassroots-level NU *kyai*, who have substantial power to mobilise their large follower bases.

Muhammadiyah: Stuck in the Middle?

Meanwhile, Muhammadiyah — Indonesia's second largest Islamic organisation — is struggling to offset concerns that it is being overshadowed by NU with regard to its national and international reputation by promoting its own moderate Islamic vision.

Without mentioning NU by name, Muhammadiyah has criticised the former's close alignment with the Jokowi administration. Abdul Mu'ti — the organisation's secretary general — stated recently that such a relationship creates the perception that the state favours a certain "[regimented understanding of religion](#)". This was an obvious reference to the Jokowi administration's various efforts to co-opt NU — by, for instance, endorsing NU's brand of "Islam Nusantara" — in its effort to neutralise the hardcore Islamists, a point I have discussed at length [elsewhere](#). Hence, Muhammadiyah is trying to differentiate its public image from NU's by stressing that it remains committed to upholding a secular nationalist Indonesian state, but also pledging [to remain politically neutral](#).

What is also a concern for Muhammadiyah is that it is losing its members — particularly younger members — to various new Islamist movements such as the *Tarbiyah* movement (which is linked to the Muslim Brotherhood), HTI, and various Salafi movements. Recent surveys have shown that the number of people self-identifying as Muhammadiyah members [has declined by more than 50%](#) within the past decade, indicating that it is losing members at a rapid rate.

Like NU, Muhammadiyah members are divided in their support for political parties contesting the 2024 legislative and presidential elections. The Muhammadiyah-linked National Mandate Party (PAN) is officially aligned with Jokowi's political coalition, but

it is widely considered to have lost significant support among the Muhammadiyah rank-and-file. Most of the organisation's members are thought to be supporting the [Ummat Party](#) — which was recently founded by former Muhammadiyah chair (and PAN founder) Amien Rais — or the Prosperous Justice Party ([PKS](#)) — which attracted many new followers from Muhammadiyah ranks, thanks to its good showing in the 2019 election, and this is a trend that is expected to continue in 2024.

Conservative Islamists: Backing One Candidate?

The third major group of Islamic actors that will be influential during the 2024 Indonesian election are [conservative Islamists](#), broadly defined to include all Islamic groups who call for closer integration between what they interpret as Islam's basic principles and the formal and informal rules of the Indonesian state and society.

There is an emerging consensus among leading conservative Islamist groups and *kyai* that they will support Anies Baswedan's candidacy for the 2024 presidential election. Indeed, PKS and the nationalist-leaning Nasdem and Democratic Party, are likely to form a coalition [to formally nominate](#) Anies. Once his presidential candidacy is formalised next year, Anies' rivals are anticipating he will obtain a combined endorsement from these groups similar to that received by Prabowo in 2019.

However, Anies and his campaign team have insisted that he will not rely solely on the support of conservative Islamists, but plans to also seek endorsement [from moderate Islamic groups](#) like NU and Muhammadiyah. This is why Anies has been travelling frequently to Central and East Java [to hold meetings](#) with NU *kyai* in their *pesantren*. Some experts have even suggested that Anies should consider [nominating senior NU politicians](#) — like East Java governor Khofifah Indar Parawansa — as his vice president to boost his electoral chances, particularly in the NU strongholds of Central and East Java.

Concluding Thoughts

Islamic organisations, *kyai*, and activists will play a significant role during the 2024 Indonesian presidential election as their endorsements are being sought by all presidential candidates contesting the race. The fact that the outcome of the presidential election will be determined in densely populated Central and East Java provinces, where a substantial number of NU and Muhammadiyah-affiliated *kyai* and followers reside, incentivises all presidential candidates to court these groups.

Nonetheless, given the ideological and political divisions within NU and Muhammadiyah, and the fragmented nature of the other more conservative Islamic groups in Indonesia, we can conclude that no single candidate will be able to secure a decisive endorsement from the majority of Indonesian Muslims. Instead, it is likely that Muslim support will be evenly divided among the different candidates. In addition, instead of being motivated purely by ideology, the decision of Islamic groups and personalities to back particular candidates will depend to a large degree on the willingness of the candidates to accommodate the demands of each group and its leaders, including the potential for post-victory political appointments and other forms of patronage.

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