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Indonesian Presidential Election: The Nahdlatul Ulama Factor

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SYNOPSIS

*Anies Baswedan has become the first Indonesian presidential candidate to make his vice-presidential nominee official by his selection the past weekend of Muhaimin Iskandar from the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) Islamic mass movement. **ALEXANDER R. ARIFANTO** argues that this nomination highlights the importance of NU's support in next year's presidential election. He believes both Ganjar Pranowo and Prabowo Subianto are likely to also consider nominating an NU-affiliated politician as running mate.*

COMMENTARY

On 1 September 2023, the Democratic Party – one of the political parties that had supported the presidential candidacy of Anies Baswedan – announced [it was withdrawing its endorsement](#). The decision was made after the party received news that the former Jakarta governor had decided to pick Muhaimin Iskandar, chairperson of the National Awakening Party (PKB), as his vice-presidential nominee.

Democrat Party officials asserted that the party decided to withdraw its endorsement of Anies because the latter allegedly [broke an earlier pledge](#) to select Agus Yudhoyono – the party's chairperson and the eldest son of former president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono – as his running mate. At the same time that the Democrats announced their withdrawal from Anies's Coalition for Change (*Koalisi Perubahan*), party officials also announced the party was now exploring [new coalition partners](#) to nominate their own presidential and vice-presidential candidates.

The following day, the Anies–Muhaimin pairing [was formally announced](#) at a news conference in Surabaya. This announcement made Anies the first presidential candidate to formally announce his vice-presidential nominee, ahead of the official candidacy filing period, which would start on 19 October 2023 and end a week later. So far none of his two opponents – respectively, Defence Minister Prabowo Subianto and Central Java Governor Ganjar Pranowo – has made his choice of running mate official.



Anies Baswedan has formally announced Muhaimin Iskandar, chairperson of the National Awakening Party (PKB) and a high-profile Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) politician, as his vice-presidential nominee. This decision may pressure his two presidential opponents, Ganjar Pranowo and Prabowo Subianto, to nominate an NU politician as their running mate. *Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

Bringing NU into Anies’s Fold

Anies’s decision to select Muhaimin as his running mate testifies to the electoral significance of PKB – but more importantly, to the significance of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Indonesia’s largest Islamic organisation, which claims more than 90 million followers. PKB is semi-officially affiliated with NU. Election analysts predict that next year’s presidential election will most likely be decided on the basis of results from East Java and Central Java provinces. Both provinces [have, respectively, 31.5 million and 28.2 million eligible voters](#), making up a total of 59.7 million voters. It is estimated that approximately two-thirds of the residents of both provinces are affiliated with NU. These two factors – the size of the combined voter base and the proportion affiliated with NU – help to explain why Anies decided to select Muhaimin as his vice-presidential nominee over Agus.

Muhaimin is not only the PKB chair and a high-profile NU politician; recent opinion polls have shown him to be highly favoured as a prospective vice-presidential nominee, especially within NU strongholds in Central Java and East Java. A February 2023 survey by Saiful Mujani Research Consultancy (SMRC) indicated that at 18.2%, [Muhaimin ranks first among NU-affiliated politicians](#) in terms of their electability. He is followed by Mahfud MD, coordinating minister of political, legal and security affairs, at 18% and Khofifah Indar Parawansa, governor of East Java, at 15.4%.

However, an Anies–Muhaimin presidential pairing also carries several drawbacks. Firstly, while NU is the largest Indonesian Islamic organisation, it is also highly factionalised. Muhaimin is estranged from the current NU leadership, headed by Yahya Cholil Staquf. Yahya responded to Anies’s official announcement of the choice of Muhaimin as running mate by issuing a statement that [NU was a politically neutral organisation](#) and that “any politician who runs for an office while claiming a NU affiliation only expresses their personal opinion, since NU does not issue any political endorsement”.

Consequently, NU followers’ support for the Anies–Muhaimin pair is far from unanimous. A survey conducted in July 2023 by Indikator Politik – another leading Indonesian polling firm – found that only 25% of voters from PKB planned to vote for Anies in the forthcoming presidential election, [40% planned to vote for Ganjar](#), while 30.5% planned to vote for Prabowo.

PKB vs PKS Rivalry

Secondly, Anies picked Muhaimin with a view to strengthening his credentials as a moderate Muslim since NU has long been considered a moderate Islamic organisation which [promotes pluralism and tolerance](#) towards non-Muslim minorities. However, another member of the coalition supporting his candidacy is the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS), a party with conservative Islamist credentials. The same Indikator survey showed that in contrast to PKB/NU voters, [68.6% of PKS voters](#) were planning to vote for Anies in the presidential election.

PKB/NU and PKS have long been in a tug-of-war over the future direction of Islam in Indonesia. Supporters of PKB and PKS have long detested one another. NU’s senior clerics have discouraged their followers from joining PKS [“at the risk of endangering their own faith”](#). In turn, PKS leaders have criticised NU chair Yahya [for his 2018 visit to Israel](#) when he was then NU’s general secretary.

So far, PKS leaders [have reaffirmed their commitment](#) to backing Anies’s presidential candidacy. However, they have also said Muhaimin’s vice-presidential nomination would need to be reviewed and approved by the party’s religious advisory council (*majelis syuro*), which is the ultimate decision-making authority within PKS. It is not clear whether the party will continue to endorse Anies’s presidential bid if the board rejects Muhaimin’s nomination.

Implications for Ganjar and Prabowo

Muhaimin’s selection as Anies’s vice-presidential nominee means both Ganjar and Prabowo are also under pressure to nominate an NU politician as their vice-presidential candidate in order to shore up support among NU-affiliated voters. Ganjar, who so far is [only backed by the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle \(PDIP\)](#) and is seemingly losing momentum in recent opinion polls, is under more intense pressure than Prabowo to do so. He could reach out to Mahfud MD, given that the latter is the only NU-affiliated politician [who could match Muhaimin’s popularity](#) among prospective NU voters. In addition to being from NU, Mahfud has a close relationship with civil society activists and could shore up Ganjar’s support among progressive-leaning Indonesian voters.

Yenny Wahid, daughter of former president and NU chair Abdurrahman Wahid, [is another attractive vice-presidential nominee for Ganjar to consider](#). Yenny is currently executive director of [the Wahid Foundation](#), named after her late father, who was widely known as a progressive leader. Hence, she is also a prospective vice-presidential candidate who could win support from progressive-leaning NU and nationalist voters if she runs with Ganjar.

Meanwhile, Prabowo has two options to respond to Anies's decision. His first option is to continue his plan to run with [Gibran Rakabuming](#), President Jokowi's eldest son, who is the current mayor of Solo. [By nominating Gibran as his running mate](#), Prabowo could win a sizeable vote share in Central Java from among voters who are aligned with Jokowi. Nonetheless, a Prabowo–Gibran coalition would only be viable [if the Constitutional Court decides](#) in favour of lowering the age of presidential and vice-presidential nominees to 35 years of age, a decision that is still pending.

Without a favourable Constitutional Court ruling, Prabowo would have to nominate another politician as his vice-presidential candidate. In these circumstances, most analysts consider State-owned Enterprises Minister Erick Thohir to be [his most likely](#) vice-presidential nominee. However, despite being appointed [as an honorary member of Banser](#), the paramilitary arm of NU's youth wing, Ansor, Erick Thohir is not formally affiliated with NU. Should Prabowo feel the need to appoint an NU-affiliated politician as running mate, he would most likely reach out to Khofifah or Yenny.

Concluding Thoughts

By nominating Muhaimin as his vice-presidential candidate, Anies hopes to gain a significant electoral boost in provinces where a sizeable number of voters are affiliated with NU. However, infighting between various NU figures and NU's tenuous relations with PKS are likely to result in a smaller number of NU voters supporting Anies's candidacy during the first round of election, scheduled for 14 February 2024. Many NU voters would most likely end up backing Ganjar or Prabowo instead.

Nonetheless, Anies's nomination of Muhaimin highlights the importance of electoral support from the largest Indonesian Islamic organisation for the upcoming presidential election. It would certainly put pressure on both of Anies's opponents to also nominate an NU-affiliated politician as running mate.

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