

The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the authors and RSIS. Please email to Editor IDSS Paper at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

No. 014/2024 dated 12 February 2024

The Role of Islam and Political Dynamics Shaping the 2024 Elections in North Sumatra

Leonard C. Sebastian and Donni Edwin

SYNOPSIS

What are the key determinants of voter support in North Sumatra? How will Islam influence the election dynamics in North Sumatra, and which presidential candidates are expected to benefit in the Indonesian election on 14 February?

COMMENTARY

Religion has always been a determining factor in electoral politics in North Sumatra. In simple terms, this fact can be gleaned from the division of voters in the 2019 presidential election. In the east coast districts, where the Muslim population is in the majority, Prabowo Subianto won. In contrast, in the west coast districts, where Christians and Catholics are the majority, Joko Widodo (“Jokowi”) won the most votes.

A similar pattern of vote splitting was also evident in the 2018 North Sumatra gubernatorial election, which involved a contest between the team of Syaiful Djarot and Sihar Sitorus, who were backed by the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP) and affiliated with President Jokowi, and that of Edy Rahmayadi and Rajekshah, who were backed by Gerindra Party and the Prosperous Justice Party (Partai Keadilan Sejahtera, PKS) and affiliated with Prabowo, Jokowi's then rival in the 2014 and 2019 presidential elections.

The 2018 gubernatorial election and the 2019 presidential election in North Sumatra were influenced by the strong political polarisation in Jakarta throughout 2017–2019. Mirroring the political dynamics in Jakarta, hardline Muslim groups in North Sumatra

formed organisations such as GNPf-Ulama (National Movement to Safeguard Fatwas–Ulama), GPAl (Gerakan Anti Penistaan Agama Islam or Anti Blasphemy Movement), and FUI (Forum Umat Islam or Islamic Ummah Forum).

However, the role and influence of religion in electoral politics is not a new feature in North Sumatra. For a long period, religion – in addition to ethnicity and clanship – has played an important role in voter preferences in North Sumatra. In the 1955 general election, an Islamic party (Masjumi) and a Christian party (Parkindo) shared the vote in North Sumatra with two non-religious parties (Indonesian National Party, PNI, and the Communist Party of Indonesia, PKI), with a vote share that roughly reflected the religious composition of the people.



Al Mashun Grand Mosque Medan, North Sumatra province. The role and influence of religion in electoral politics is not a new feature in North Sumatra. In fact, religion – in addition to ethnicity and clanship – has played an important role in voter preferences in North Sumatra for a long time. *Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

The people of North Sumatra, the majority of whom adhere to two major religions – Islam (66%) and Christianity/Catholicism (31%) – and hail from various ethnic and sub-ethnic groups and *marga* (clans), do tend to vote for candidates on the basis of affinity with their primordial identities. Therefore, in elections for the positions of governor, mayor, regent, and even village head, primordial identity is generally the main consideration for parties, both in the process of determining candidates and in formulating campaign strategies to gain voter support. In Siantar District, where the majority of the population is Christian, for example, the elected regent is generally a Christian and the vice-regent a Muslim. This shows the importance of religious considerations in determining the pair of candidates who will run in regency-level elections.

How does Islam influence the election dynamics in North Sumatra, and who are the presidential candidates who would stand to benefit?

Major Players of Political Islam in North Sumatra

The main players in political Islam in North Sumatra in the reform era can be divided into three categories. First, Islamic organisations including Al Jami'atul al Washliyah (known for short as Al Washliyah), Al-Ittihadiyah, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the country's largest mass Islamic organisation, and Muhammadiyah, the second largest mass Islamic organisation. Second, the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI), the council of religious scholars. Third, *ustadz* (clerics) figures who are popular in the community.

Al Washliyah is the largest and most influential Islamic organisation in North Sumatra. Like Al-Ittihadiyah, Al Washliyah is an indigenous Islamic organisation in North Sumatra. It is active in the political sphere, in addition to the social arena, such as in education and health. Like NU, Al Washliyah adheres to the Shafi'i *madhab* (school of Islamic law), the most common in Indonesia, and explicitly identifies as part of the *Ahl al-Sunah wa al-Jama'ah* or orthodox Islamic community that upholds the Sunnah of the Prophet and the unity of the Muslim community.

Unlike NU and Muhammadiyah, Al-Washliyah has never established its own political party. But Al-Washliyah members are spread across different political parties such as Partai Persatuan Pembangunan (United Development Party, PPP), Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa (National Awakening Party, PKB), Democratic Party, and Golkar Party. Several key figures within Al-Washliyah's regional leadership (*pimpinan wilayah*) are also members of political parties. The chairman of Al-Washliyah's regional leadership, Dedi Iskandar Batubara, for example, was a member of the Dewan Perwakilan Daerah (DPD, or Regional Representative Council of the Indonesian parliament) for two terms, winning the largest number of votes. He is also one of the leaders in the GNPf-Ulama movement in North Sumatra.

The influence of NU, Muhammadiyah and Al-Ittihadiyah in the electoral politics of North Sumatra is not as strong as that of Al Washliyah. NU is generally influential among the Mandailing ethnic group in South Tapanuli, where the largest and oldest NU *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) in North Sumatra, Pesantren Mustofaiyah, is located. The grandson of the founder of Pesantren Mustofaiyah, Harun Mustofa Nasution, is currently the deputy chairman of the North Sumatra Regional House of Representatives (DPRD) and represents the Gerindra Party. He received the most votes in the 2019 local elections in the South Tapanuli electoral district, which includes the regencies/cities of Mandailing Natal, Padang Lawas, North Padang Lawas and Padang Sidempuan. The current regent of Mandailing Natal, M. Jafar Sukhairi Nasution, is also the leader of NU and one of the leaders of PKB in the area.

Meanwhile, Muhammadiyah, which is highly influential among the Minangkabau ethnic minority in North Sumatra, is not very active in the politics of the province. Muhammadiyah usually channels its political aspirations to the National Mandate Party (Partai Amanat Nasional, PAN). Rafdinal, deputy chairman of the Muhammadiyah Regional Leadership, is the founder of PAN in North Sumatra, a member of the 2014 DPD and one of the leaders of the North Sumatra GNPf-Ulama movement.

In addition to these major Islamic organisations, there are also other relatively new Islamic organisations such as Jam'iyah Batak Muslim Indonesia (JBMI), the Islamic

Batak Association (PBI) and various *tariqah* associations (Sufi orders). One of the heads of JBMI, Ustadz Aidan Nazwir Panggabean, is the chairman of the advisory council (Majelis Pertimbangan Dewan Pimpinan Wilayah) of PKB. He also is the chairman of GNPf-Ulama North Sumatra and a member of the Indonesian Muslim Scholars Association (ICMI).

Which Presidential Candidate Will Benefit?

Anies Baswedan is expected to win the majority of votes from Muslim voters in North Sumatra. This is mainly because Anies still has a strong "Islam" political identity. Although he has recently tried hard to shed his association with identity politics, he is still trying to retain the support of Islamists owing to his alliance with the GNPf-Ulama. As soon as he was confirmed as the *Koalisi Perubahan's* (Coalition of Change) presidential candidate, which then comprised the Nasdem Party, PKS, and the Democrat Party, he immediately visited Habib Rizieq Shihab, GNPf-Ulama supreme leader in Jakarta.

During his visit to North Sumatra a year ago, Anies called on Tuan Guru Besilam, also known as Khalifah Dr Zikmal Fuad, at the Pesantren Persulukan Besilam Islamic in Langkat Regency, a *tariqah*-based *pesantren* in Langkat Regency, which is named after the latter. On that occasion Anies made a pilgrimage to the grave of a respected scholar, Sheikh Abdul Wahab Rokan. He also met with the Persatuan Gereja-Gereja Indonesia Wilayah (Association of Indonesian Churches in the Region, PGIW) and tried to convince his audience that during his time as governor of Jakarta he had treated all religious believers fairly, citing the fact that he had built a house of worship for Hindus.

NU elements in MUI showed their support for Anies and his running mate, Muhaimin Iskandar. For its part, PKB had declared its support for Muhaimin, its chairman, long before he was named the vice-presidential candidate. It characterised its support as the result of the "*ijtima ulama* of North Sumatera" or gathering of religious scholars. Participating in the declaration of support was an NU figure from Mandailingnatal, M. Jafar Sukhairi Nasution. Muhaimin also received support from Tuan Guru Batak Sheikh Ahmad Sabban Rajagukguk, a leader of the Naqsabandiyah *tariqah* in Simalungun Regency.

A source close to the North Sumatra MUI revealed that NU elements in MUI considered Anies to be more "representative of an Islamic leader" than the other two presidential candidates. Support for Anies also comes from *majelis taqlims* (recitation groups), which are usually attended by women. The network of *majelis taqlim* in North Sumatra is generally controlled by *ustadz* from MUI and Al-Washliyah. According to our source, Al-Washilah North Sumatra is almost certainly behind Anies. At the minimum, he is personally backed by its chairman, Dedi Iskandar Batubara. Anies himself had come to meet Dedi Iskandar in September 2023.

Meanwhile, the other two presidential candidate pairs, Ganjar Pranowo–Mahfud MD and Prabowo–Gibran Rakabuming, would have difficulty gaining votes from Muslim voters. PDIP and Jokowi are not popular among the support base of major political Islamists in North Sumatra. The two presidential candidates also do not flag Islam as

their political identity. Instead, they will both split the share of votes in the west coast districts.

Leonard C. SEBASTIAN is Senior Fellow and Coordinator, Indonesia Programme at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), and **Donni EDWIN** is a Lecturer at the Department of Political Science, FISIP-Universitas Indonesia.

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
T: +65 6790 6982 | E: rsispublications@ntu.edu.sg | W: www.rsis.edu.sg