

THE RISE OF POPULIST ISLAM IN INDONESIA

Populist Islam, in the sense of using Islam as justification for activism in the social and political arena, is growing in Indonesia. The call for Shariah law implementation in various socio-political aspects is the main focus. The ones who are directly involved in political Islam is relatively small, but still have the ability to receive wide media attention by bringing up sensitive religious issues and attract mainstream Indonesian Muslims who have become increasingly conservative in their religious values. Advocates of populist Islam accumulated strong influence in Jakarta's governor election in 2017 by supporting candidate Anies Baswedan, who won the election, and also in the presidential election in 2019 by supporting Prabowo Subianto, who lost for the second time against the incumbent president Joko Widodo.

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Populist Islam, in the sense of using Islam as justification for activism in the social and political arena, is growing in Indonesia. Calls for the implementation of *Shariah* (Islamic law) in various socio-political aspects is the main focus of this movement. Although those who are directly involved in these movements are actually relatively small in number, they have the ability to call the media's attention. They do this mainly through notorious campaigns and activities, such as smashing cafes that sell alcohol during Ramadan and aggressive demonstrations regarding anti-gambling, anti-prostitution, religious harassment, pro-Palestine, anti-US, and other political issues, such as gubernatorial and presidential elections. The most prominent organization in this movement is the FPI (Islamic Defenders Front), though various other organizations have been formed specifically related to certain demonstrations as well, such as the GPU (Defenders of Muslim Clerics) that was formed to protect *ulama* (clerics) from what they call as unfair treatment by the police. Populist Islam does not have any direct connections with terrorist groups who utilize Islam to justify their causes.

In Indonesian democratic politics, Islamic parties tend to only take around a 30 percent share of voters in general elections, and about the same portion of the number of seats in the parliament.¹ All Islamic parties that participate in the general elections, namely PKB (the National Awakening Party), PKS (the Welfare and Justice Party), PPP (the United Development Party), PAN (the National Mandate Party), PBB (the Moon and Crescent Party, which did not pass the threshold to enter parliament), accept *Pancasila* (five principles) as the basic principles of the nation: faith in one god, humanity, national unity, consensus, and social justice. The formal Islamic parties no longer call for an Islamic state and the implementation of *Shariah*. This is one reason why in Indonesia populist Islamist activists do not want to form political parties to compete in the general election, as they do not want to conform with state principles and democratic rules. They prefer to voice their calls outside of parliament. Nevertheless, populist Islam is still able to influence mainstream politics to push their agenda. Their power is rooted in pressures “from the street”, and as a result, have influence on members of parliament (MPs) who are sympathetic to their causes, mainly MPs from Islamic parties.

Influence in Jakarta's Gubernatorial Election

The Indonesian government has attempted to ban the FPI and name it as an illegal organization on a number of occasions, so far unsuccessfully. The FPI's relations

¹ According to KPU (The General Election Committee), in the 2019 general election, the Islamist parties won 171 out of 575 total seats (30%). In the general election of 2014, Islamist parties won 175 out of 560 seats (31%). In the general election in 2009, the Islamist parties won 169 out of 560 seats (30%). In the 2004 general election, the Islamist parties won 219 out of 560 seats (39%); In the 1999 general election, the Islamist parties won 168 out of 500 seats (33%).

with several important people in security agencies and the significant public support has assisted in their survival. In contrast, the government has been able to ban another populist Islamic organization, HTI (*Hizbuttahrir Indonesia*), that openly called for the formation of an Islamic caliphate, the abandonment of the *Pancasila*, and for the implementation of *Shariah*. For some time, populist Islamist movements found little resonance within mainstream Islam. Even for most Indonesian Muslims, populist Islam is seen as a movement that does not reflect the peaceful and tolerant nature of Islamic societies.

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However, things changed when the governorship of Indonesia’s capital city Jakarta passed on to Ahok (Basuki Tjahaja Purnama), the Indonesian-Chinese and Christian former vice governor, when the previous governor Jokowi (Joko Widodo) was elected as the president. His controversial comment against an interpretation of the *Quran* stating that Muslims are not allowed to vote for non-Muslim leaders received strong reactions, including accusations of blasphemy.² Ahok’s straight-talk and confrontative style, along with statements that often offended many people, added to the resentment building against him. One anti-Ahok demonstration is estimated to have drawn more than 400,000 people on 2 December 2016 at the center of Jakarta.³ This day spawned the 212 movement that continues to assert political influence today.⁴ Despite leading in the polls, such demonstrations against Ahok led to his loss in the subsequent election. The demonstrations led by populist Islamist activists benefitted his opponent Anies Baswedan, who went on to win the Jakarta gubernatorial election in 2017. Ahok himself was found guilty for blasphemy and was sentenced to two years in prison.

The question is why mainstream Muslims are attracted to populist Islamism led

² The written statement by the Indonesia Ulama Assembly (MUI) on 11 October 2016 stated that Al Quran Surah Al Maidah verse 51 explicitly forbade Muslims from electing Christian and Jewish leaders. Basuki’s statement that voters should not be misled by those who misuse the Surah Al Maidah to determine their vote was considered by the MUI as blasphemy. The MUI statement was signed by its Chairman, Maruf Amin (who was later elected as Vice President alongside Jokowi as the re-elected president). “Islamic religious texts must be read in context to understand blasphemy,” *The Jakarta Post*, 2 December 2016, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/academia/2016/12/02/islamic-religious-texts-must-be-read-in-context-to-understand-blasphemy.html>

³ CNN Indonesia calculated the number of participants in the 212 demonstration by considering the area and the number of people per meter square, and came up with 411,600 people.

⁴ Sheany, “Understanding the 212 Movement,” *Jakarta Globe*, 17 April 2018, <https://jakartaglobe.id/context/understanding-212-movement>

by the FPI, despite it being considered unrepresentative of Islam's peaceful face. The answer is that there is growing religious conservatism among the Indonesian population. More people go to the mosque to pray, and even in large malls in big cities, *musholla* (prayer place for Muslim men and women) are widely used for prayers by Muslim shoppers. More women are wearing *hijabs* that cover their heads.⁵ *Halal* restrictions on the production and consumption of food are widely practiced. More families send their children to (modern) Islamic schools.⁶ Although this trend for conservatism does not automatically translate into politics, as shown by the stagnant votes of Islamic parties in the general elections, it can significantly influence politics when there are shared common issues, such as with the blasphemy accusation against then Governor Ahok.

In situations where the Muslim community shares common ground, they participate in demonstrations in large numbers. In addition, the role of social media here is significant. Social media amplified and even dramatized the issue to gather more support from mainstream Muslims. However, this cannot be as easily repeated as populist Islamist leaders may like. Islamist populists under the banner of the 212 movement would like to spark further demonstrations to challenge the legitimacy of Jokowi's presidency. But this cannot go through in a significant way.

Influence in the Presidential Election

The other important event that showed the rise of populist Islamism in mainstream Indonesian politics was during the presidential election in 2019. Presidential candidate Prabowo Subianto was seen by populist Islamists as a reliable leader who could challenge the incumbent Jokowi and carry forward their populist Islamist agenda. The *ijma* (consensus) among Muslim *ulamas* (scholars) associated with populist Islamism concluded that Prabowo had to pick his running mate from among the *ulamas*. However, this decision was not followed by Prabowo for practical and political reasons. He instead preferred a running mate who could contribute to financing the campaign, attract young voters, and who had credentials as a devoted Muslim. This running mate ended up being Sandiaga Uno, a young successful investment banker known for his piety. Despite this conflict, the support from Muslim voters for Prabowo's bid for presidency remained strong, mainly because there was no other presidential candidate suitable for them.

⁵ According to the Ministry of Industry, 225 out of 750 small industries in Indonesia are producers of Muslim fashion. According to the Global Business Indonesia Guide (GBG), simple and practical veils are used by 60-70 percent of Indonesian women, while Shariah veils (longer and of more conservative colors, such as white, black, and brown) are used by 10 percent Indonesian women. For more, see: http://www.gbgingonesia.com/en/manufacturing/article/2016/indonesia_aiming_to_be_the_islamic_fashion_capital_by_2020_11646.php

⁶ According to the JSIT website, the number of Integrated Islamic Schools (JSIT) was 246 in 2003, and reached 2418 in 2018 all over Indonesia. This number does not include other private Islamic schools outside JSITs: <https://jsit-indonesia.com>; According to the Ministry of Education, in Indonesia there are 47,221 state and private Islamic schools.

Popular preachers with large number of followers publicly supported Prabowo and urged their followers to vote for him. For instance, preacher Abdul Somad even went as far by saying that he met five high ranking *ulamas* (*ulama khos*) who received special spiritual messages that imparted Prabowo's victory in the presidential election, urging Muslim voters to vote for Prabowo. The late Arifin Ilham, another popular preacher with many followers, also called for direct support for Prabowo as a way to show his commitment to the role of Islam in social and political life.

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Meanwhile, the incumbent President Jokowi attempted to pick well known Muslim intellectual and former Chairman of the Constitutional Court Mohammad Mahfud as his running mate. Mahfud is considered popular among Muslim voters and therefore as someone that could assist Jokowi in gaining their support. However, this move was blocked by Jokowi's own coalition members—namely Golkar (the Functional Party), PKB (the National Awakening Party), and Nasdem (the National Democratic Party)—as they saw the intention to appoint Mahfud being against their political interests. As an alternative, Jokowi shifted to senior cleric and Chairman of the Indonesia Ulama Council (MUI) Maruf Amin (76 years old) as his running mate. This was basically Jokowi's own choice, as it was made without significant consultation with his political coalition. This shows how vulnerable Jokowi's political stance can be against pressures from populist Islamism. In order to gain support from Muslim voters, Jokowi even went for *Umrah* (small pilgrimage to Mecca) and negotiated with the Saudi Arabian government for a higher quota for Indonesian *haji* pilgrimages during the cooling period of his presidential election campaign. Jokowi really wanted to win in the important Muslim constituencies such as West Java, Banten, West Sumatera, Aceh, and South Sulawesi—the areas that he lost in the presidential election against Prabowo in 2014. But this did not happen, populist Islamists and conservative Muslims were able to influence mainstream Muslims to vote for Prabowo, especially in those regions.

By concentrating his political efforts on districts with large voters in Java, namely Central Java and East Java, and with the support of non-Muslim voters in Bali, East Nusa Tenggara, North Sulawesi, West Kalimantan, and Papua, Jokowi was re-elected as the president in 2019 by a significant margin of eleven percent, as reported by the General Election Committee (KPU). Areas with a strong conservative Muslim

population such as West Java, Banten, South Sulawesi, South Kalimantan, West Sumatera, and Aceh all showed Prabowo leading in the polls.⁷ Clearly, conservative Muslim voters were behind Prabowo, with direct support from populist Islamists. Although Prabowo himself does not actually have strong credibility as a Muslim leader, he is the only presidential candidate who conservative Muslims and populist Islamists can rally behind and push to conform with their agenda.

However, this was not the case for the general election. Again, the outcome for Islamist political parties was stagnant, totaling at around just 30 percent of the votes. This again shows that the majority of Muslim voters do not vote for Islamist parties. For most Indonesian Muslims, MP candidates from Muslim parties are not seen as necessarily better than MPs from nationalist parties, such as PDIP (the Indonesia Democratic Struggle Party), Golkar, Gerindra (the Great Indonesia Movement Party), and Nasdem, in fighting for voters' interests. Besides, there are also many good Muslim MP candidates in these nationalist parties.

Muslim supporters behind Prabowo continued to fight against Jokowi even after the election committee had announced him as the winner. They claimed that there was a massive and organized fraud in the presidential election. Although the case was pushed to the Constitutional Court, it was eventually lost, but supporters kept encouraging Prabowo to stand against Jokowi and any effort for reconciliation. They are basically anti-Jokowi, since they see him as opposed to Islam and its principles. In the end, however, Prabowo dissolved the political coalition and personally reconciled with Jokowi. This certainly upset a significant number of supporters of populist Islamism. These supporters abandoned Prabowo, and instead, committed themselves to their leader Habieb Rizieq, who is in exile in Saudi Arabia. They also committed themselves to undermining Jokowi's presidency whenever possible.

This situation shows that Indonesian politics is still very much based on personal interest and patronage rather than ideology or a policy platform. Most political parties are led by powerful figures, such as Megawati Sukarnoputri (daughter of the first president Sukarno) for PDIP (which is also the largest party), and Prabowo (former general and son in law of the second president Suharto) for Gerindra, with a vast network of patronage. President Jokowi is an anomaly, without his own political party or a significant patronage network. Instead, he appeals to voters directly with the support of PDIP. For political parties, ideology and platform, such as Islamism and social economic policies, are mainly symbolic. For that reason, populist Islamism sees the strong ideological view of Islam as an alternative to formal political parties.

⁷ According to KPU (the General Election Committee), Jokowi won in Central Java province with 77.3%, in East Java with 65.8%, in Bali (Hindu majority) with 91.7 %, in East Nusa Tenggara (Christian majority) with 88.6%, North Sulawesi (Christian majority) with 77.2%, and Papua (non- Muslim majority) with 90.7%; Prabowo won in West Sumatera, a stronghold of Muslim voters, with 85.9%, Aceh 85.6%, West Nusa Tenggara 67.9%, Banten 61.5%, and West Java with 59.9% of the votes.

Populist Islamism is very much alive and can influence Indonesian politics whenever the possibility arises. They influence mainstream Muslims, political parties, and MPs not only from the Islamic but also from nationalist parties.

“The role of moderate Muslims is crucial for Indonesia to not fall under the influence of populist Islamism, as it threatens the social and political stability of the country with its intolerant approach and polarizing effects.””

In the future, populist Islam will still likely have significant political influence, especially in crucial social and political issues, such as religious tolerance, and local and presidential elections. It is likely that they will support Jakarta’s current governor Anies Baswedan for president in 2024. With his level of popularity, he could receive enough support to meet the 20 percent threshold for seats in parliament that is required of presidential candidates. Anies received significant support from populist Islamists to win the election for the governorship while keeping a distance from their agenda, especially on *Shariah* implementation. As elected governor, Anies has launched mainstream programs for economic growth and welfare while upholding Islamic values as much as possible in democratic politics. He manages his position carefully in order not to fall into the trap of a populist Islamist agenda. Alternatively, populist Islamists could look for other presidential candidates that they think would be suitable to their agenda. For example, former vice presidential candidate Sandiaga could be the alternative candidate for populist Islamist support. After all, he has received their support in both Jakarta’s gubernatorial election as Anies Baswedan’s running mate in 2017, and as the vice presidential candidate on Prabowo’s presidential campaign in 2019.

The Balancing Act of Moderate Muslims

Moderate Muslims are represented by long lived organizations — especially *Nahdhatul Ulama* (NU) and *Muhammadiyah* — as the mainstream Indonesian Muslims in the counterbalancing act against the rise of populist Islamism. They are fully committed to *Pancasila*, keeping the peaceful and tolerant image of Islam intact, and are accommodative to the trend of Muslim conservatism in various aspects of social and political life. Regarding the influence of populist Islamism, NU leaders take the opposite stance against the populist Islamism movement, even standing in direct opposition with FPI leaders. Moreover, NU leaders have started their own campaign