PERSPECTIVE

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Support for Decentralization and Political Islam Go Together in Indonesia

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- In the post-Suharto era, political power has been decentralized across multiple levels of government.

- The ISEAS Indonesia National Survey Project, a large-scale survey on social, economic and political issues, shows high levels of public support for this decentralized, multi-level political system.

- Individuals who support a larger role for Islam in politics are markedly more supportive of decentralization and regional autonomy.

- This finding is consistent with the decades-old ideological battle between secular nationalist and political Islam forces over the nature of the Indonesian state.

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[1] This perspective is the second in the series based on the Indonesia National Survey Project, published under ISEAS' Trends in Southeast Asia, available at https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/trends-in-southeast-asia. This perspective follows the first which was published on 8 September (ISEAS Perspective 2017 No. 68) by Siwage Dharma Negara on "Promoting Growth with Equity: Indonesia's 2018 Budget".

INTRODUCTION

Decentralized governance has been a key feature of Indonesian democratization. With the laws on regional autonomy (*otonomi daerah*) implemented in 2001, local governments acquired substantial policy powers in fields such as economic development, healthcare, education, natural resources and infrastructure. Furthermore, a system of intergovernmental transfers was established as a financing mechanism for local government. As a result, Indonesia today is a multi-level political system in which policy prerogatives are divided across various levels of government.

After one and a half decade of decentralized government, the record of regional autonomy in this large and diverse country appears mixed. On the one hand, many Indonesian regions have seized the opportunity presented by decentralization. Many local politicians and administrators are professional and civic-minded, and some local governments, as I show elsewhere in the context of healthcare (Fossati 2017), have implemented progressive policies to improve social welfare. On the other hand, however, it is easy to find illustrations of utter failure of the decentralization project, as many district and provincial governments throughout Indonesia remain incompetent, unaccountable and corrupt (Hadiz 2004). Moreover, local governments have at times used their newly acquired prerogatives to implement exclusionary policies that have marginalized ethno-religious minorities and women, as in the well-known case of local sharia by-laws.

Since the vast literature on Indonesian local politics focuses mostly on political elites, we lack a thorough understanding of how the public perceives and evaluates regional autonomy. How supportive are common Indonesians of multi-level governance? What exactly do they like and dislike in this system of government? Does support for decentralization vary significantly across regions and individuals, and if so, why?

To explore these questions, I leverage on original data from the ISEAS Indonesian National Survey Project (INSP), a large-scale survey of a nationally representative sample of the Indonesian population. The survey, designed by researchers of the Indonesia Studies Programme at ISEAS and implemented in May 2017, collected data on various economic, social and political issues from face-to-face interviews with about 1,600 Indonesian citizens in every Indonesian province, thus providing a highly valuable and rich source of data for original analysis.

I start by analysing survey questions measuring public support for various features of multi-level politics, such as the division of power across levels of government. Following this, I concentrate on one factor, support for political Islam (i.e., support for a more prominent role for Islam in public affairs) as a driver of preferences over decentralized governance. As I explain later, the analytical focus on political Islam is warranted by the close relationship between Islamist movements and autonomist demands in Indonesian history. Using various survey questions I have designed to measure support for a greater role for Islam in politics, I find that political Islamists are more likely to support decentralized governance. I conclude

with some comments on the relevance of the findings for current debates on the state of democracy in Indonesia.

UNPACKING MULTI-LEVEL GOVERNANCE

As decentralization reforms have devolved substantial responsibilities to local government, Indonesia is often described as a highly decentralized political system. However, this characterization overlooks the multiple levels of subnational government in Indonesia, and how their importance in decentralized governance has evolved since democratization. While the first package of decentralization reforms identified districts as the key level of local governance, revisions introduced in 2004 shifted substantial powers to provinces, and further changes in 2014 added villages as a further level of governance (Ostwald, Tajima, & Samphantharak 2016).

This shows that the debate on decentralization in Indonesia is not only concerned with the extent of regional autonomy, but also the appropriate administrative level for decentralized governance. It is therefore more accurate to describe Indonesia as a "multi-level" political system than merely a decentralized one. Local governments are embedded in a complex structure in which policy responsibilities overlap, and cooperation with other subnational units is essential to ensure good public policy (Firman 2009; Fossati 2016a).

Following this formulation, the first question the INSP asks about decentralization presents Indonesia as having "several levels of government, such as national, provincial, and district/city government", and asks respondents how well they think, in general, this system of government is working. Answers to this question suggest overwhelming support for multi-level governance, as 80% of the sample believes that this system is working "quite well" or "very well" and the remaining 20% expresses dissatisfaction (system working "not well at all" or "not very well").

With reference to the debate outlined above on the appropriate level of local government, we further ask which level of government should have the most power, allowing respondents to choose among provincial, district and village government. Results suggest that most Indonesians (53%) see provinces as the ideal subnational level of government, followed by districts/cities (28%) and villages (19%).[2]

These results suggest that, overall, Indonesians are very supportive of their country being a multi-level political system, and that they see provinces as the optimal level for decision-making in local government. However, the questions analysed above are too general for us

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[2] Specifically, the question asks: "*Concerning regional autonomy in Indonesia, people have different opinions as to which level of government should retain most power. In your opinion, which level of government should have most power?*". While most Indonesians think that provinces should have most power in local government, results vary somewhat by region. For instance, respondents in Sulawesi are much more likely to identify districts (54%) than provinces (25%) as the optimal level of subnational government.

to understand exactly what people like and dislike about multi-level governance in Indonesia. To gain a more nuanced understanding of public support for multi-level governance, I draw from the comparative literature on political culture, which measures support for federalism by distinguishing among various aspects of governance in multi-level political systems (Brown 2012).

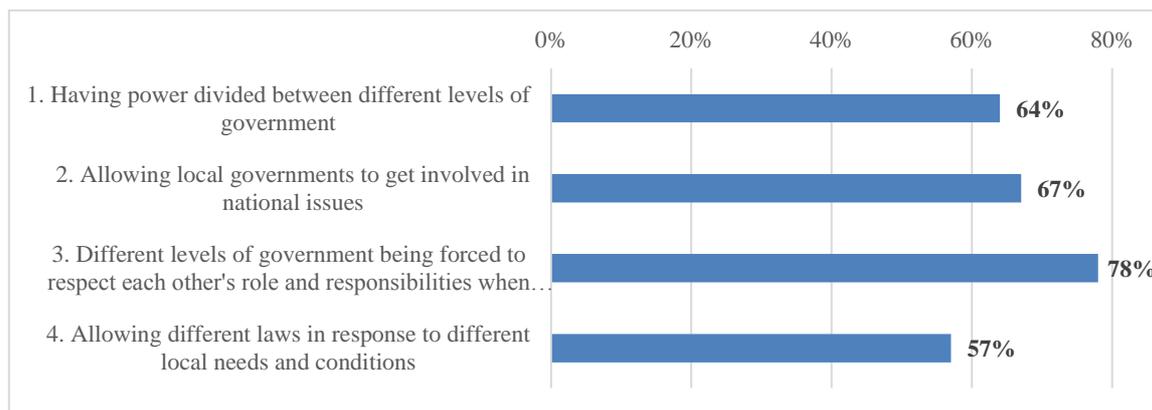**Figure 1. Public Support for Four Features of Multi-level Political Systems.**

Figure 1 reports the results for survey questions asking respondents to evaluate how desirable four distinct aspects of multi-level governance are, and it shows substantial variation in public support across the four indicators.[3] The first item refers to the general principle of having power divided across levels of government, and it is supported by 64% of respondents. A similar share of the sample, 67%, supports the second aspect of multi-level governance, which focuses on participation by local government in national decision-making as a key feature. The third item is the most broadly supported of the four (78%), and it suggests a relationship of mutual respect among units at different levels of government. This figure indicates that the most valued aspect of multi-level governance in Indonesia is its ability to promote balance among the policy preferences of different levels of government and to buttress a spirit of collegiality in policy-making.

The last item of the scale, however, is significantly more controversial, being supported by a relatively low 57% of respondents. For the purposes of this paper, this question is particularly interesting, because it measures the degree to which Indonesians approve that their political system should acknowledge, preserve and enable heterogeneity in local legislation. This issue is one of the most salient in the debate on decentralization in Indonesia. As mentioned in the introduction, many have raised concerns that local regulations (*peraturan daerah* or *perda*) may promote discrimination against minority groups such as non-Muslims and women (Fauzi 2016; "Komnas Perempuan Finds 421

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[3] Respondents evaluate these items using a five-point scale in which lower values correspond to lower levels of support (1= Not desirable at all; 2= Somewhat undesirable; 3= Neither desirable nor undesirable; 4= Somewhat desirable; 5= Very desirable). I recode the answers into a simpler binary scale in which 1 and 0 indicate support (values 4 or 5 in the original scale) and lack of support (values 1-3) for each item, respectively.

Discriminatory Policies" 2016). I will thus focus on this item in the remainder of the paper as an indicator of support for what is commonly referred to as "decentralization" in the Indonesian context, namely the prerogative of local governments to design and implement policies that mirror the preferences of their constituencies.

POLITICAL ISLAM AND SUPPORT FOR DECENTRALIZATION

Centre-periphery relations have been a crucial issue for state formation in Indonesia, where tensions between Jakarta and the regions long predate the implementation of the sweeping decentralization reforms of the early 2000s (Booth 2014). To divide and rule the Indonesian population and its leadership, the Dutch created a federalist state in Indonesia in the mid-1940s. This initiative was strongly opposed by Indonesian nationalists, who came to see support for federalism as collaboration with the colonial masters, and advocated instead a unitary vision of the new Indonesian state (Feith 1962, pp. 70-71). This important critical juncture created a strong association between nationalist-secularist ideology and preference over centralized governance.

At the opposite end of the ideological spectrum, radical political Islam has often been identified as supporting, sometimes through violent means, a larger role for regions in Indonesian government. Shortly after decolonization, a first important challenge to the Indonesian state was the secessionist Darul Islam insurgency, in which guerrillas, mostly located in West Java, Aceh and South Sulawesi, proclaimed an independent Islamic state within Indonesian territory. In the late 1950s, the Islamic party Masyumi was disbanded along with other regional parties for its involvement in rebellions in Sumatra and Sulawesi (Lev 2009; Nordholt 2005, pp. 43-44).

Does this deep-rooted connection between political Islam and autonomist demands still matter in contemporary Indonesia, where ideology is often portrayed as being marginal in policy-making and voting behaviour? One way to answer this question is to explore one of its implications at the individual level. Since regional autonomy has been traditionally spearheaded by Islamic political movements and parties, supporters of political Islam should display higher levels of support for decentralized rule than secularist individuals.

To test this proposition, I have developed a scale to measure support for political Islam based on the seven items reported in Table 1. The idea behind this approach is that, while we cannot directly observe support for political Islam, it is possible to measure it by presenting a series of statements that tap into the different dimensions of the ideological divide between secularism and political Islam, and by asking respondents how much they agree with each of them.[4] Some of these items refer to issues that are common to all Muslim-

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[4] Respondents express agreement using a five-point scale in which lower values correspond to lower levels of agreement (1= Strongly disagree; 2= Disagree; 3= Neither agree nor disagree; 4= Agree; 5= Strongly agree). I recode the answers into a simpler binary scale in which 1 and 0

majority countries. For instance, the first question asks whether respondents agree that the government should prioritize Islam over other religions. Others, such as Items 5 and 6, are more specific to the Indonesian context, as they were inspired by recent debates that unfolded over the gubernatorial election in Jakarta.[5]

The figures reported in Table 1 suggest that Indonesians are quite evenly divided on the key issue of the role of Islam in political life. On average, 46% percent of the population supports these items, which suggests a substantial balance between those who favour a clearer demarcation between state and Islam and those who support a more prominent role for Islam in state institutions. However, there is substantial variation across the items. The most radical of them, such as Items 4 and 7, are supported only by a minority of the sample, while some others, such as Item 5, find much broader support.

Table 1. The Political Islam Scale

|	Item	Support
1	The government should prioritize Islam over other religions	49%
2	Islamic religious leaders should play a very important role in politics	37%
3	Indonesian regions should be allowed to implement sharia law at the local level	41%
4	Sharia law should be implemented throughout Indonesia	39%
5	Blasphemy against Islam should be punished more severely	63%
6	When voting in elections, it is very important to choose a Muslim leader	58%
7	Islam should become Indonesia's only official religion	36%

What is, then, the empirical association between support for regional autonomy and political Islam? Data from the INSP suggest that support for decentralization, as measured by the fourth item listed in Figure 1, is positively correlated with each and every one of these indicators of political Islam. For example, support for regional autonomy drops from 63% in respondents who endorse the statement "The government should prioritize Islam over other religions" to 51% in those who do not; support for decentralization among proponents of sharia law (Item 4) is 67%, but only 51% in those who oppose it; and so forth. Figure 2 displays the distribution of support for decentralization over six items from Table 1, and it suggests a clear pattern of variation: regardless of the specific indicator used, supporters of political Islam are systematically more likely to support regional autonomy than secularist

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indicate support (values 4 or 5 in the original scale) and lack of support (values 1-3) for each statement, respectively.

[5] The 2017 elections in Jakarta featured the unprecedented case of a Christian Chinese candidate, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, running for governor. The heated electoral campaign focused on identity issues, especially religion. It included mass demonstrations organised by radical Islamists, a criminal indictment on blasphemy charges against Purnama, and a public debate on whether Muslim voters should be allowed to support non-Muslim political candidates.

respondents. A similar relationship is observed by disaggregating support for decentralization over religious groups: regional autonomy is supported by 59% of Indonesian Muslims, but only by 47% of Indonesians belonging to a religious minority.

Figure 2. Support for Decentralisation by Political Islam
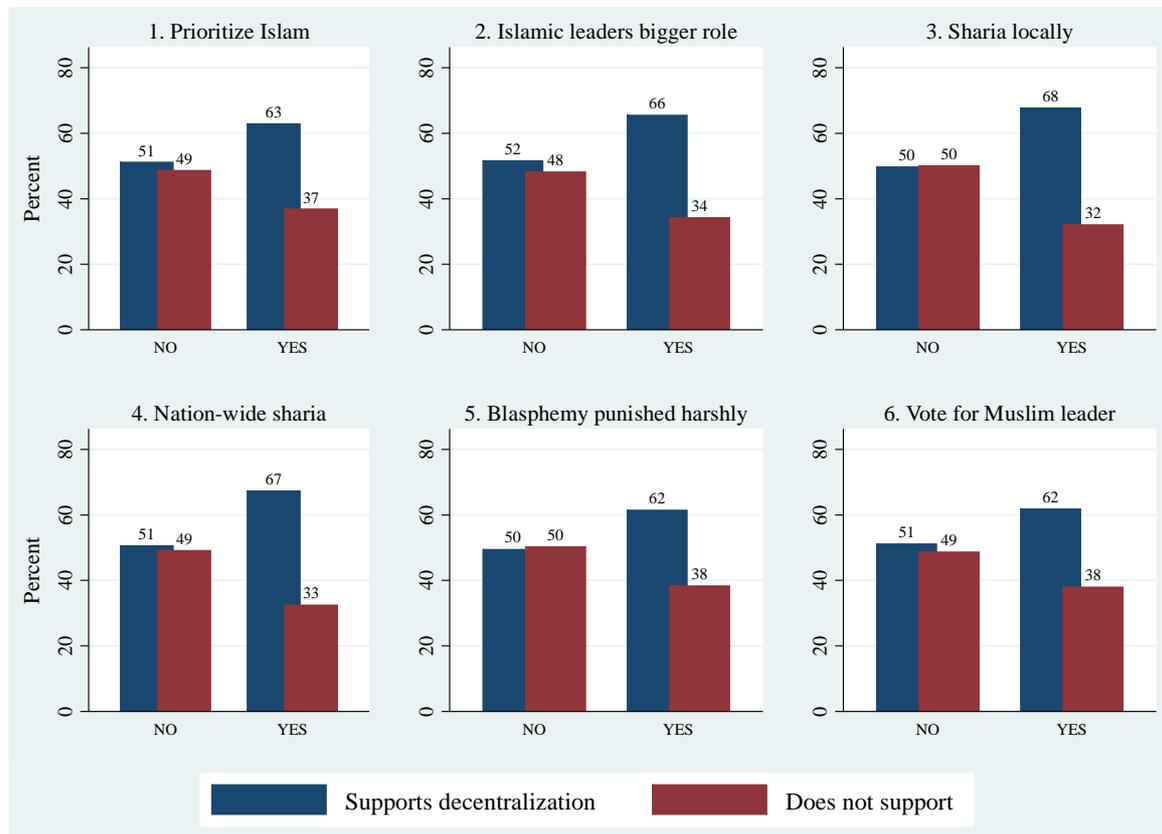
A possible implication of this finding is that support for regional autonomy may be higher among voters of Islamic political parties. Given their generally weak position in national politics, Islamic parties may have been advocating increased regional autonomy to advance their political agenda in the more favourable arena of local politics. In turn, their supporters may have developed more positive attitudes over decentralization. Survey data, however, suggest that this is not the case. Voters of secular-nationalist PDI-P are as likely (59%) to support decentralization as voters of Islamist PKS (60%) or non-ideological Golkar (59%).[6] This finding is perhaps not surprising in the context of Indonesian politics, where political parties are typically considered as displaying low levels of programmatic differentiation. The diffusion of local sharia by-laws is a case in point, since Islamic local regulations are often implemented by politicians from non-Islamic political parties (Buehler 2013).

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[6] The survey question on party choice was answered by 1,100 respondents, of which 361 expressed a preference for PDI-P, 46 for PKS, and 187 for Golkar.

CONCLUSION

Support for decentralization and support for political Islam are closely related in Indonesia. Using original data from the INSP, I find that individuals who support a larger role for Islam in political life are more likely to agree that local governments be allowed to implement laws according to local needs, conditions and preferences. This finding resonates with our understanding of the historical trajectory of centre-periphery relations in this country, which has often intersected with issues of secularism and the development of an Indonesian national identity.

The analysis presented in this paper has implications for contemporary debates on Indonesian politics, especially as they pertain to democratic consolidation and decentralized governance. First, the findings indicate the persisting relevance of the ideological cleavage between secularism and political Islam in Indonesian politics. The answers to the items I have developed to measure political Islam show that Indonesians are divided on the crucial issue of the role of Islam in state affairs. Most importantly, the correlation between political Islam and support for decentralization indicates that the secularism-political Islam ideological framework still shapes how common Indonesians think about a crucial policy area such as regional autonomy. This contrasts with a view of Indonesian politics as driven exclusively by patronage and devoid of meaningful ideological debates.

Second, this paper illustrates the relevance of a persisting unresolved issue in Indonesian politics, namely the tension between allowing for heterogeneity and representativeness through regional autonomy and the goal to avoid subnational inequalities by (re)-centralizing key policy areas. Earlier this year, the Constitutional Court delivered a victory for the regions by abrogating provisions implemented in 2014 that allowed provincial governors and the national government to review and invalidate local regulations. This move, seen by many as increasing uncertainty over the rule of law in Indonesia (Butt 2017), is likely to spur further discussion on how to reconcile aspirations of equality in civil rights for all Indonesians and demands for respect of what Indonesians see as the right (and duty) of local governments to accommodate the preferences of their constituencies. Whatever solution Indonesian leaders choose to resolve this dilemma, regional autonomy is often credited with having kept the country together in the tumultuous years following the collapse of the New Order regime. The high levels of support for multi-level governance identified in the survey data suggest that, indeed, decentralization has been a key source of state legitimacy in post-Suharto Indonesia.

Finally, the findings have implications for the debate on democratization in the Indonesian regions, especially the introduction of local direct elections, known in Indonesia as *pilkada*. Local direct elections are extremely popular among Indonesian voters, and I have argued elsewhere that, under certain conditions, they increase the responsiveness of local government (Fossati 2016b). Responsiveness, however, could also work in a more alarming direction, as electoral considerations could induce elected leaders to implement radical policies such as laws that curtail civil liberties or discriminate against minorities. The data reviewed here suggest that this insight is not lost on Indonesian Islamists. Indeed, a

considerable share of the Indonesian electorate supports decentralization and *pilkada* elections precisely because they see regional autonomy as an opportunity to implement more radical and exclusionary policies than Jakarta would allow in a more centralized political system.

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