

# PERSPECTIVE

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## Islamist Figures and Their Limited Role in Indonesia's 2024 Presidential Election

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*Indonesia's president-elect Prabowo Subianto (L) and vice president-elect Gibran Rakabuming Raka (R) wave to journalists after the plenary meeting of the general election commission (KPU) announcing the 2024 presidential election in Jakarta on 24 April 2024. Under the upcoming Prabowo Subianto government, which begins its term in October 2024, Islamists are expected to have greater room to manoeuvre. (Photo by ADEK BERRY / AFP).*

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- This article discusses the role of Indonesian Islamists in the 2024 Presidential Election. Their role merits discussion because they have been impactful during various episodes of Indonesia's political history.
- This article argues that unlike previous elections, the Islamists did not play a significant role in the run-up to the 2024 Presidential Election.
- Their dwindling social and political influence can be attributed to state repression under President Joko Widodo's regime and the shifting of political alliances among nationalists and religious elites.
- However, under the upcoming Prabowo Subianto government, which begins its term in October 2024, the Islamists are expected to have greater room to manoeuvre.
- Under Prabowo's regime, they are expected to be under less social and political pressure, judging from Prabowo's history of working together with Islamists.

## INTRODUCTION

This article discusses the role of Indonesian Islamists in the 2024 Presidential Election. Although Islamists are generally peripheral players in Indonesian politics, they have had significant influence on Indonesia's social and political conditions, due to their religious legitimacy and their skills in mobilising the masses.

A case in point was their role in the anti-Ahok protests in the run-up to the Jakarta gubernatorial election in 2017. Despite being small in numbers, the Islamists rallied as the 212 Aksi Bela Islam Movement (Defending Islam Movement) and managed to mobilise Muslims from various backgrounds to stage a series of protests against Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok), former governor of Jakarta whom they accused of committing blasphemy against Islam. The protests, one of which was the biggest in Indonesian history, successfully prevented Ahok, who held a double minority status, a Christian and a Chinese Indonesian, from winning the election. At the same time, the protests also brought Habib Rizieq, the leader of the Islamic Defender's Front (FPI) and a long-time fringe player in Indonesian politics, to the apex of his social and political status. The Islamists also played a significant role in instigating anti-Ahmadiyah and anti-Shia protests nationwide; these were rampant during the presidency of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (2004-2014).

"Islamists" in this article loosely refers to Islamic activists who operate outside the formal political structure. In other words, they do not occupy positions as leaders of political parties, councillors, legislators or state actors. Instead, they promote their ideas and interests through street protests and religious events. A substantial number of Islamists are leaders and members of FPI, Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI), and the Salafi movement.<sup>1</sup> According to scholar Greg Fealy, they aspire "to make Islamic law and values a central part of public life and the structure of the state."<sup>2</sup> Unlike moderate Muslims, Islamists tend to support the establishment of Sharia law and reject the appointment of non-Muslim leaders in strategic leadership positions such as governorship or presidency (and vice-presidency). However, Islamists do not support acts of terror and, therefore, are distinct from extremist Muslims.

It is important to note that Indonesian Muslims are diverse in orientation. For the purpose of this research, the definition of Islamist used in this article excludes moderate Muslims of the modernist and traditionalist type (people who follow religious beliefs and practices of Muhammadiyah and Nadhlatul Ulama, respectively) as well as religious figures and organisations that support terrorism such as Jamaah Ansharut Daulah or other supporters of the Islamic State (ISIS).

Recent academic literature discusses Islamists resorting to populism or riding on blasphemy issues to gain religious legitimacy. Some scholars have argued that populism among Islamists arose due to deepening religious conservatism,<sup>3</sup> while others contend that this is instead due to experiences of social injustice.<sup>4</sup> Islamists have also used blasphemy to attain their objectives.<sup>5</sup> This article seeks to expand the existing scholarship on the role of Islamists in Indonesian politics. This article will also discuss the future of Islamists in the post-Joko Widodo era as his term ends in October 2024. It argues that the Islamists' loss in significance in the 2024 Presidential Election was mainly due to their social and political influence being weakened by

state repression under Joko Widodo, and to shifts in political alliances among nationalists and religious elites.

## **REPRESSION OF ISLAMISTS UNDER JOKO WIDODO**

The protests against Ahok in 2017 sharply increased Islamists' political influence. The effective framing of the blasphemy case saw the National Movement to Safeguard the Indonesian Ulema Council's Fatwa (GNPF-MUI) successfully mobilising thousands of Muslims to participate in the series of protests.

While the protests targeted Ahok, the ultimate aim of the Islamists was to undermine Joko Widodo's popularity and power going into the 2019 Presidential Election.<sup>6</sup> Following the successful anti-Ahok protests, the Islamists formed the Persaudaraan Alumni 212 (the 212 Brotherhood Alumni) to sustain the momentum of the Aksi Bela Islam movement and uphold public support for them.

However, the political influence of the Islamists weakened when Joko Widodo began consolidating his power by controlling security apparatuses, building stronger ties with civil society, and expanding a coalition of parties to control seats in the parliament. Joko Widodo granted strategic security positions to at least two individuals with whom he had established relationships during his tenure as mayor of Solo between 2005 and 2012. Hadi Tjahjanto, the man Joko Widodo installed as the chief of the Indonesian military on 8 December 2017, was a military airport commander in Solo between 2010 and 2011, while Listyo Sigit Prabowo, chief of the Solo police between 2010 and 2012, was appointed as national chief of police on 27 January 2021.

Joko Widodo also obtained support from civil society by building partnerships with Nadhlatul Ulama, for example, by appointing Ma'ruf Amin, a senior NU cleric, as his vice-presidential candidate. Nadhlatul Ulama is Indonesia's largest Muslim organisation whose moderate ideology stands in contrast to that of the Islamists. Good ties with NU is strategic as a vote-getter and the move proved hugely successful in the 2019 Presidential Election. Partnership with NU provided the government with an effective counterbalance to the power of the Islamists.

Joko Widodo also successfully expanded a coalition of political parties to have a firmer grip on the House of Representatives. At the beginning of his administration in 2014, he controlled 207 seats out of the total 560 seats in the parliament.<sup>7</sup> In 2022, he added more parties to the pro-government coalition, increasing the number of seats under his control to 471 seats – equivalent to 81.9 percent of the total seats.<sup>8</sup> He consolidated his power through a carrot-and-stick approach. On one hand, he offered governmental positions, including ministerial positions, to parties in exchange for their support.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, he ensured that none of these positions were offered to opposition parties, including the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS).

As Joko Widodo's power base grew, the Islamists faced contrasting fates including legal prosecution. Their frontman, Habib Rizieq Shihab, was jailed for spreading fake news while another prominent figure during the 212 protest, Mohammad Al Khaththath, was arrested on

treason charges. In addition, seven FPI executives were arrested on various charges including terrorism. Islamist organisations also became a target of state repression. HTI was banned in 2018, followed by FPI two years later. The criminalisation and the banning of these organisations weakened the Islamists, and explains their limited influence during the 2024 presidential campaign.

## SHIFTING POLITICAL ALLIANCES

Another factor that has weakened the Islamists is the shift in political alliances. In the 2014 and 2019 presidential elections, Islamists had rendered their support to Prabowo Subianto. However, Jokowi successfully convinced pro-Prabowo Islamist supporters to switch allegiance to his camp. In 2014, only one Islamic party supported Jokowi, but the number increased to three in the 2019 election: the Nation Awakening Party (PKB), the United Development Party (PPP) and the Crescent Star Party (PBB). Some politicians who had been known to support Islamist causes also left Prabowo in favour of Jokowi, including Ali Mochtar Ngabalin, Kapitra Ampera, Yusril Ihza Mahendra and Zainul Majdi.<sup>10</sup> Their departure not only weakened the Islamists, it also made them vulnerable.

A political bombshell was dropped when Prabowo accepted Jokowi's offer to join his administration and cast aside his Islamist allies while seeking political support from moderate Muslim figures and organisations such as Nadhlatul Ulama.<sup>11</sup> Islamists felt that Prabowo abandoned them, and called him "a traitor."<sup>12</sup>

Going into the 2024 Presidential Election, support for Islamic parties was fragmented. The Prabowo-Gibran pair obtained support from PBB and the National Mandate Party (PAN), whereas the Anies-Muhaimin and Ganjar-Mahfud pairs received support from PKS and PPP respectively. As a result of the three-way race and the fragmented support from Islamic parties, identity politics became a non-viable weapon. This resulted in little demand among candidates to engage with the Islamists to mobilise the masses.

Initially, none of the presidential and vice-presidential candidate pairs sought support from the 212 Brotherhood Alumni. Anies-Muhaimin ultimately did, and on 21 November 2023, they signed an integrity pact with 212 on 14 December 2023.

## THE RISE AND DECLINE OF THE ISLAMIST POLITICAL BASE

The following paragraphs examine the loss in stature of some prominent Islamist personalities in the face of state repression and shifting political alliances.

Mohammad Al Khaththath, also known as Gatot Saptono, the Secretary General of Forum Umat Islam (FUI), played a prominent role as GNPf MUI's secretary general during the protests against Ahok. However, after his arrest on 31 March 2017 on treason charges, he remained inactive. He was released in July 2017 at the request of his wife and an influential ulema. Mohammad Al Khaththath only appeared once in public on 10 October 2023 when he normatively called for the public and government to promote a peaceful election.<sup>13</sup>

Islamists who played a more active role, albeit with limited influence, in the 2024 Presidential Election were Habib Rizieq Shihab, Novel Bamukmin, Bachtiar Nasir and Yusuf Muhammad Martak. All, except Bachtiar Nasir, remain active in the 212 Brotherhood Alumni movement.

The controversial firebrand cleric, Habib Rizieq Shihab, was rather muted throughout the election. This founder of FPI in 1998, who then expanded it into a national-scale organisation, was known for leading his men in street protests for a variety of causes. Rizieq, who is now the chairman of the 212 Brotherhood Alumni's governing board, is known for his combative and divisive sermons publicised at various religious and community events nationwide. His social and political career has experienced several ups and downs. He was imprisoned for provoking violence in 2008 and for defamation in 2003, but he enjoyed the peak of his Islamic activism career after successfully inspiring and mobilising people for the anti-Ahok protests between 2016 and 2017. His role made him one of the nation's prominent political players as well as influential ulema. In 2018, a survey found that he was among the five most influential ulema in Indonesia.<sup>14</sup> His political career suffered a setback in 2020 after he was found guilty of spreading fake news and lying about the results of his Covid-19 test. He was released on parole in July 2022 which is to end in June 2024. During the 2024 Presidential Election campaign, he often appeared at religious events both offline and online. He appeared most frequently on the Islamic Brotherhood Television, the official media of the Front Persaudaraan Islam (Islamic Brotherhood Front), the organisation that replaced FPI. Perhaps bound by parole regulations, Habib Rizieq appeared less critical of Joko Widodo's regime and mostly addressed general topics relating to the presidential election. He eventually expressed his support for Anies-Muhaimin. Unlike in past elections, Habib Rizieq did not organise or participate in any movement to support his preferred candidates.

Novel Bamukmin is the 212 Brotherhood Alumni's deputy secretary general. He was active at FPI's Jakarta chapter, but was fired from his position and had his membership revoked in December 2017, for internal insubordination. He joined the 212 Brotherhood Alumni in 2018 where he has since served as one of the executives in the Islamist organisation. He remained outspoken and often created social controversies through comments in the mainstream media. In 2023, he opposed the organising of Coldplay concert in Jakarta, accusing the music group of promoting Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual and Trans-Sexual (LGBT) interests.<sup>15</sup> He also often participated in street protests that promote the interests of FPI, and later, PA 212. Recently, he made public comments regarding the 212 Brotherhood Alumni's political position in the 2024 Presidential Election. The organisation eventually supported the candidacy of Anies Baswedan and Muhaimin Iskandar. However, as explained above, the organisation's power had weakened to such an extent that the candidate pair took their support reluctantly.

Bachtiar Nasir, a Salafist, is a seasoned activist. He is an educator, ulema and the secretary general of the Council of Indonesian Intellectuals and Young Ulema (MIUMI). He became widely known after assuming the position of chairman and guarantor of GNPf MUI in 2016. He was mainly responsible for formulating the protest agenda, ensuring the protests received sufficient funding and making sure that the protests ran smoothly without major incidents. After stepping down in 2018, Bachtiar faced several charges including treason and money laundering. However, his cases have remained stagnant; the police has neither continued their investigation nor officially closed the matter. In the run-up to the 2024 Presidential Election, he attended some huge events such as Gontor Islamic boarding school alumni's declaration of

support for Anies and Muhaimin, and the biggest outdoor campaign for Anies-Muhaimin in Jakarta International Stadium in North Jakarta on 10 February 2024.<sup>16</sup> However, he did not partake in organising these events, in stark contrast to the central role he played in organising the anti-Ahok protests.

Unlike other Islamists, Yusuf Muhammad Martak, the chairman of the 212 Brotherhood Alumni's advisory council, is quite new to Islamic activism. He comes from a family of businessmen who have an interest in politics. His uncle, Faradj Martak, donated his house to Soekarno, Indonesia's independence fighter and the country's first president.<sup>17</sup> He spent much of his career as a businessman. His social and political career began when he served as MUI's treasurer in 2015. He later joined the 212 movement and remains active in it. Representing the movement, he demanded that the Indonesia Election Commission cancel Joko Widodo-Ma'ruf Amin's victory in the 2019 Presidential Election for electoral fraud. In the recent presidential election, he was one of the executives in the campaign team for Anies-Muhaimin.

The above cases show that a majority of the Islamists, except for Yusuf Martak, are ulema who are also capable of mobilising the masses. The Islamists had been able to collaborate militant or conservative causes, as demonstrated in the anti-Ahok and anti-Ahmadiyah protests. Such collaborations had boosted their political power. However, they played a limited role during the 2024 Presidential Election following state repression by the Joko Widodo regime and the shifting political alliances among political actors.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, this article has explained that Islamists failed to play a significant role in the 2024 Presidential Election due to repression under President Joko Widodo and the shifting of political alliances. This was further proven by the limited role some Islamist key figures played, such as Rizieq Shihab, Novel Bamukmin, Yusuf Martak and Bachtiar Nasir.

However, under President Prabowo Subianto, the Islamists are anticipated to have more room to manoeuvre. It is expected that they will no longer face stiff social and political pressure from the state given Prabowo's history of working together with Islamists. It is unlikely that Prabowo will resort to social and political repression. Prabowo is a secular nationalist, and hence, uninterested in Islamic activism. He is nevertheless pragmatic, and working together with the Islamists to further his agenda remains on the table. Despite setbacks under President Joko Widodo, the Islamists will continue to have influence in Indonesian social and political spheres.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Salafi is a movement that persuades Muslims to return to the Islamic ideas and practices implemented during the era of Prophet Muhammad and the two generations after him.

<sup>2</sup> Greg Fealy, "Jokowi's repressive pluralism", *East Asia Forum*, 27 September 2020, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2020/09/27/jokowis-repressive-pluralism/>, accessed on 25 March 2024.

- <sup>3</sup> Greg Fealy, "Bigger Than Ahok: Explaining The 2 December Mass Rally," *Asia Pacific Solidarity Network*, December 7, 2016, <https://www.asia-pacific-solidarity.net/index.php/news/2016-12-07/bigger-ahok-explaining-2-december-mass-rally.html>, accessed on 25 March 2024.
- <sup>4</sup> Ian Wilson, "Making Enemies Out of Friends," *New Mandala*, 3 November 2016, <https://www.newmandala.org/making-enemies-friends/>, accessed on 25 March 2024.
- <sup>5</sup> For a discussion on the rise of intolerance under the government of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, see Lindsey, T., & Pausacker, H. (Eds.). (2016). *Religion, Law and Intolerance in Indonesia* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315657356>
- <sup>6</sup> Adib Muttaqien Asfar, "Target Kasus Ahok Terkait Pilpres 2019? Ini Analisisnya", <https://news.solopos.com/>, published on 21 November 2016, <https://news.solopos.com/2016/11/21/target-kasus-ahok-terkait-pilpres-2019-ini-analisisnya-770639>. Accessed on 28 March 2024.
- <sup>7</sup> Bobby Chandra, "Begini Peta Kekuatan Jokowi-Prabowo di DPR", *Tempo.co*, published on 8 September 2014, <https://nasional.tempo.co/read/605195/begini-peta-kekuatan-jokowi-prabowo-di-dpr>. Accessed on 26 March 2024.
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- <sup>9</sup> The appointment of Agus Harimurti Yudhoyono (Democratic Party), Raja Juli Antoni (Indonesian Solidarity Party), and Dito Ariotedjo (Golkar Party) as minister [deputy minister] are examples of the implementation of "carrot" politics.
- <sup>10</sup> Azis Anwar Fachrudin, "Mempertanyakan Kembali Aliansi Prabowo dengan Kaum Islamis", *Tirto.id*, published on 26 March 2019, <https://tirto.id/mempertanyakan-kembali-aliansi-prabowo-dengan-kaum-islam-dj8Z>. Accessed on 26 March 2024.
- <sup>11</sup> Andri Saubani, "Basis Massa Prabowo Dahulu dari PA 212-FPI dkk, Kini Ia Merapat ke Kalangan NU", *Republika.co.id*, published on 26 September 2022, <https://news.republika.co.id/berita/rit03m409/basis-massa-prabowo-dahulu-dari-pa-212fpi-dkk-kini-ia-merapat-ke-kalangan-nu>. Accessed on 26 March 2024.
- <sup>12</sup> Reza Gunadha & Ria Rizki Nirmala Sari, "PA 212: Prabowo Berkhianat!", *Suara.com*, published on 18 July 2019, <https://www.suara.com/news/2019/07/18/160356/pa-212-prabowo-berkhianat?page=all>. Accessed on 26 March 2024.
- <sup>13</sup> Adhila, "Sekjen FUI Serukan Pemilu Damai, Ajak Semua Elemen Jaga Persatuan dan Kesatuan", *Suaraislam.id*, published on 10 October 2023, <https://suaraislam.id/imbauan-fui-jelang-pemilu-2024/>. Accessed on 5 April 2024.
- <sup>14</sup> Lalu Rahadian, "LSI Ungkap 5 Ulama Paling Berpengaruh di Indonesia", *Tirto Indonesia*, published on 14 November 2018, <https://tirto.id/lsi-ungkap-5-ulama-paling-berpengaruh-di-indonesia-c97m>. Accessed on 6 March 2024.
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- <sup>16</sup> Febrian Fachri, "UBN Pidato Lawan Kecurangan dan Massa Teriak 'Sorry Ye, Sorry Ye' di Luar JIS", *Republika.co.id*, published on 10 February 2024, <https://pemilikita.republika.co.id/berita/s8mgyr484/ubn-pidato-lawan-kecurangan-dan-massa-teriak-sorry-ye-sorry-ye-di-luar-jis>. Accessed on 5 April 2024.
- <sup>17</sup> Iswara N. Arditya, "Sejarah Hidup Yusuf Martak: dari Isu Lapindo ke Ijtima Ulama III", *Tirto Indonesia*, published on 4 May 2019, <https://tirto.id/sejarah-hidup-yusuf-martak-dari-isu-lapindo-ke-ijtima-ulama-iii-dnBk>. Accessed on 13 March 2024.



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