

PERSPECTIVE

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The Ma'ruf Amin Vice-presidential Candidacy: Enticing or Splitting Conservative Votes?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Indonesia's 2019 presidential and vice-presidential candidate nominations were finalized on Friday, 10 August 2018. President Joko Widodo's choice of Ma'ruf Amin as his running mate has brought mixed responses from among Jokowi's supporters, and a dilemma for religious minorities.
- Ma'ruf Amin is the supreme leader (*rais 'am*) of NU (Nahdlatul Ulama), the country's largest Muslim organisation which is typically viewed as a champion of moderate Islam.
- Ma'ruf Amin was however also an important figure behind the controversial fatwas against Ahmadiyah, and against Basuki Tjahaya Purnama (Ahok), which led to conservative and radical Muslims' discriminatory actions against the former and the imprisonment of the latter.
- By settling for Ma'ruf Amin as his running-mate, Jokowi hopes to strengthen his candidacy's Islamic credentials and win the votes of the conservative and moderate Muslims. Yet, it is not at all clear that Ma'ruf's candidacy will attract conservative votes.
- The future of religious tolerance and harmony may be at risk. If Jokowi wins next year, the President will have to curb Ma'ruf Amin's conservative religious inclinations to prevent religious minorities such as Ahmadiyah and Shiah from experiencing even more repressive treatment at the hands of the state.

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INTRODUCTION

On 9 August 2018, President Joko Widodo (Jokowi) announced that he had chosen Ma'ruf Amin, chairman of the Indonesian Council of Ulama (MUI), as his running mate for the 2019 Presidential election.

This move was surprising for several reasons. For one thing, Ma'ruf is religiously conservative. Although lately he has become one of Jokowi's supporters, he is also known for his role in issuing *fatwas*, or religious edicts, against "secularism, liberalism, and pluralism", and against the Ahmadiyah – an Islamic movement considered deviant by Indonesian mainstream Islam. These moves conflict with Jokowi's stance on religious tolerance. Moreover, Ma'ruf was one of the main proponents of the "*fatwa*" accusing the former Jakarta governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok) of blasphemy.¹

What are the factors underlying Jokowi's selection of Ma'ruf Amin? Moreover, seeing the "ideological" difference between Jokowi and Ma'ruf Amin, what challenges will the President face in the campaign? How will identity politics be featured? Furthermore, if Jokowi wins the 2019 presidential election, with the vice-president having been involved with intolerant policies in the past, what is the prospect for Indonesia's religious harmony?

This paper argues that by settling for Ma'ruf Amin as his running mate, Jokowi aspires to avoid a bitter Islamist campaign against himself and win the votes of both moderate and conservative Muslims. However, the President may have to face several challenges: first, Ma'ruf's candidacy may not attract conservative votes, second, Jokowi's non-conservative supporters may be disappointed by his VP choice and therefore not turn out to vote, and third, should Jokowi win in the election, he will have to curb his VP's conservative inclinations in order to safeguard Indonesia's commitment to religious tolerance.

A DRAMATIC APPOINTMENT

The decision to appoint Ma'ruf Amin was dramatic. Shortly before the announcement, another VP candidate hopeful, Mahfud MD, former Chief Justice of the Constitutional Court, was still being prepared to be Jokowi's running mate. He was called to the palace to submit his CV and get a white shirt – emblematic of Jokowi – tailored for the occasion, and told to get ready. Mahfud was even asked to be on standby not far from the venue for the announcement.²

The public had welcomed the news that Mahfud MD was to be Jokowi's choice for VP, as he is known as a reputable scholar and statesman and, like Jokowi, is moderate in his religious views. However, NU leaders rejected this choice arguing that Mahfud does not represent NU, and that despite his NU origin, he has never been an activist of the Muslim organization.³ Jokowi thus came under pressure, not only from NU but also from PKB (National Awakening Party), which is led by the youthful politician Muhaimin Iskandar, who himself had aspired to be VP candidate.

Other coalition parties were also wary of Mahfud for fear that he would launch his own bid for presidency in the next presidential election in 2024. He will be 67 in 2024, and if he should run, then the power aspirations of younger cadres such as PKB's Muhaimin Iskandar,

Indonesian Democratic Party for Struggle (PDIP)'s Puan Maharani or United Development Party (PPP)'s Romahurmuziy would be hampered. Given that Ma'ruf Amin is already 76 (b. 11 March 1943), his chances of running in 2024 are very small. The political parties' leaders therefore decided that Ma'ruf was the ideal running mate, and Jokowi buckled under the pressure. For Mahfud, this is the second time in a row that he has failed to secure the VP candidacy.⁴

WHO IS MA'RUF AMIN?

Ticket-balancing, or when a presidential candidate strategically chooses a running mate who can bring a stronger appeal to his campaign, is widely practiced across democracies. In Indonesia, ticket-balancing, in terms of ideology or religion-balancing, is geared toward attracting votes from different identity backgrounds, as is evident in the mixed-ticket strategy often seen in the gubernatorial elections. Vice-president candidates are therefore not only a complement to the president but also vote-getters in their own right. Jusuf Kalla, for example, was widely believed to have helped Jokowi attract support from his home region of Eastern Indonesia back in 2014.

Moreover, vice presidents do not usually stay in obscurity. Instead, they tend to actively influence strategic policy making. This is one main reason having Ma'ruf Amin, a conservative Muslim, as vice-presidential candidate to Jokowi, a progressive, brings concerns about the prospect of religious harmony.

Ma'ruf Amin is an influential religious figure. Aside from being the chairman of MUI, he is also the supreme leader (*rais 'am*) of the NU which champions moderate Islam. Prior to his appointment at NU, however, Ma'ruf was involved in the issuance of the controversial joint ministerial decree banning the activities of Ahmadiyah in 2008 and MUI's *fatwa* on Ahmadiyah in 2005. Some observers consequently believe that his appointment as NU's supreme leader has brought conservatism into the otherwise moderate organization.⁵ He also had a significant role in the Islamist mobilizations in 2016 and early 2017, particularly in the issuance of MUI's "*fatwa*" on blasphemy, regarding Ahok's speech at Pulau Seribu in September 2016.⁶ He was a key expert witness in the trial that sent Ahok to prison for two years.



Ma'ruf Amin with Ahmad Najib Burhani in his house in Koja, North Jakarta, in 2012

Source: Author

Ma'ruf Amin is among those who strongly believe that shari'a should be implemented in Indonesia, albeit through constitutional processes. During a three-hour interview with one of the authors at Ma'ruf's home in Jakarta in 2012⁷, he said that "Shari'a must be implemented, not through radical means, but through democracy and must be constitutional". He mentioned that shari'a should be implemented through the process of "*taṭbīqiyyah wa qānūniyyah*" ("embedded in the system and laws"), beginning with the issuance of fatwa, followed by *tausiyah* (admonition) and recommendation, before a bill is proposed. Examples of such process being followed would be the passing of the law on shari'a banking and the anti-pornography law.

Ma'ruf Amin also considers liberalism a deviant ideology. For him, liberal practices are "*bi lā hudūdin wa lā dawābi*" (without limitations and regulations). The extreme opposite of the liberals, he argues, are the textualist or literalist groups, which he defines as "*al-jumūd alā al-manqūlāt*" (rigidity on the issue of text). The example of literalists are Salafy or Wahhabi groups. Ma'ruf rejects these two opposing groups and proposes moderate Islam.

More worrisome are his views toward religious minorities such as Ahmadiyah and Syiah. Ma'ruf Amin firmly believes in the difference between religious diversity and deviation. In theological terms, Ma'ruf Amin differentiates between disputable and undisputable religious issues ("*fī majāli al-ikhtilāf wa fī ghairi majāli al-ikhtilāf*"). For him, religious diversity, as in the case of the differences of religious rituals practiced by NU and Muhammadiyah, falls within the disputable area, and can thus be tolerated. However, the belief in the existence of a prophet after the Prophet Muhammad, as in Ahmadiyah's case, is a deviation from accepted beliefs. To him, the belief in the finality of prophethood falls within the indisputable area, and Muslim groups that deviate from this should be strongly condemned. Using Ma'ruf Amin's term, "diversity is tolerated, whereas deviation must be amputated" (*perbedaan ditoleransi, penyimpangan diamputasi*).

MA'RUF AMIN AND THE CONSERVATIVE VOTERS

Ma'ruf Amin's appointment thus demonstrates Jokowi's aspiration to win the hearts of both the conservative and the moderate Muslims. The senior cleric does seem to embody both groups: despite being the supreme leader of the nation's largest moderate Muslim organization, his personal conservative inclination may render him still attractive to some conservative voters. At the same time, Jokowi's appointment of Ma'ruf may also work to split the conservative voters that would have overwhelmingly supported anyone contending against Jokowi.⁸

Recent surveys have shown that Jokowi needs to garner more Islamic votes. Although Jokowi remains the most popular presidential candidate – even among Muslims – a significant number of those connected to moderate groups are leaning towards Prabowo.⁹ A survey fielded by Populi Center in February listed that 34.6% of those connected to Muhammadiyah, and 25.4% of those connected to NU would vote for the former general. The appointment of Ma'ruf, who appears to be acceptable to both the moderates and the conservatives, thus seems to be a safety move by Jokowi's camp.

With Ma'ruf as his running mate, Jokowi may also have avoided a repeat of the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election, where a bitter politicization along religious lines resulted in the triumph of the Islamist-backed candidate, Anies Baswedan. By appointing a prominent Islamic scholar such as Ma'ruf, Jokowi may be strategically following the recommendation of the *Ijtima Ulama*, the congregation of Islamic scholars organized by GNPf in Jakarta in July 2018, which had recommended that Prabowo pick an ulama as his running mate. By a surprising turn of the events, instead of Prabowo, it is Jokowi who has appointed an ulama as his running mate.

Having Ma'ruf Amin on the ticket, however, still does not guarantee that the President will receive overwhelming support from the conservatives. Despite not daring to openly taunt Ma'ruf, some conservatives seem steadfast in their support of Prabowo. On social media, conservatives and right-wing Islamic leaders have been seen to state things such as the following: "Let's sincerely accept the fact and respect the *ulama* chosen by the President [as his running-mate], yet let's further strive to ensure the victory of the President [candidate] chosen by the *ulama*(s)."¹⁰ This clearly calls for Muslims to vote for Prabowo, who was chosen by the *Ijtima Ulama*, but without showing disrespect for Ma'ruf Amin at the same time.

Some conservatives also seem to have dissociated themselves from MUI as an organization. GNPf-MUI changed its name to GNPf Ulama after MUI distanced itself from GNPf's rallies and urged the latter to drop "MUI" from their name.¹¹ And even without MUI's involvement, the GNPf and the 212 action supporters have continued to thrive. Although it is doubtful that they will be able again to organize large rallies similar to the ones held in 2016-2017, their political influence remains strong. This is proven by their successful *Ijtima Ulama*, which was attended by Anies Baswedan, Prabowo, Amien Rais, Zulkifli Hasan, Yusril Ihza Mahendra, Sohibul Iman, and other "anti-Jokowi" political figures.

Moreover, the emergence of new religious figures such as social-media preacher Ustadz Abdul Somad may pose a challenge to Ma'ruf Amin's and MUI's religious authority among the conservatives. The conservatives may have previously supported MUI's fatwas because these were in line with their religious stance, but when their political interests are no longer congruent

with that of MUI's or Ma'ruf's, they seem totally willing to switch allegiance to other religious leaders.

Not only among the conservatives, Ma'ruf Amin's VP candidacy has brought different reactions even within NU. Yenny Wahid, daughter of the late Former President Abdurrahman Wahid who was a long-serving NU chairman, maintains that although individual members are allowed to follow their own political preference, NU as an organization remains politically neutral.¹² NU chairman Said Aqil Siradj, on the other hand, is certain that NU members will support Ma'ruf Amin, even without being mobilized.¹³

The second factor concerns the possible disillusionment of Jokowi's supporters with this pragmatic "win-at-all-cost" approach which seems to have compromised his ideals. Jokowi had earlier been criticized by his supporters for other pragmatic policies, such as the appointment of Din Syamsuddin, former Muhammadiyah leader whom many consider to represent Muhammadiyah's conservative 'faction', as the Presidential Special Envoy for Interfaith Dialog and Civilization Affairs. He also appointed Ali Mochtar Ngabalin, who was in Prabowo's 2014 campaign team and politician of the conservative Crescent and Star party – PBB, as expert staff member in the Presidential Office (KSP). By appointing Ma'ruf Amin, the president may further compromise support from his pluralist base.

Such disillusionment seems to be especially felt by the former supporters of Ahok, among whom there has been a call for abstention (*golput*) in the 2019 elections. Ahok himself has not commented on this, however. In May, remarking on the 2018 local elections, Ahok had called for his followers to refrain from abstention and to vote for his "allies".¹⁴ Moreover, the fear of the repeat of the 2017 Jakarta situation will likely prevent abstention among Ahok's supporters in 2019. Supporters are urged to turn out to vote for Jokowi to prevent Ahok's "real enemies" from obtaining power.¹⁵

CONCLUSION: PROSPECTS OF RELIGIOUS (IN-)TOLERANCE AND (DIS-)HARMONY?

What does Ma'ruf's appointment mean for the 2019 campaign and for religious tolerance in general in Indonesia? Jokowi's camp has argued that the appointment of Ma'ruf Amin will prevent the mobilization of sectarianism and black campaign in the upcoming election.¹⁶ However, since identity politics has been bringing political triumphs for Prabowo's camp in gubernatorial elections, they might be tempted to keep using such a strategy in 2019. Signs for this are already visible. Recently, the anti-Jokowi group verbally attacked West Nusa Tenggara governor and prominent ulama, Muhammad Zainul Majdi, or Tuan Guru Bajang (TGB), for switching sides from Prabowo to Jokowi. Among many derogatory terms, they called TGB *ulama su'* (bad religious scholar).

Prabowo's camp may also attack the principle of *Islam Nusantara*, NU's new brand of Indonesian moderate Islam, which is strongly supported by Jokowi. This would create tension and even split Indonesian Muslims. The most recent attacks came from West Sumatra's branch of MUI which issued a fatwa challenging the authority of Ma'ruf Amin as MUI's chairman and as proponent of *Islam Nusantara*.

On the other hand, Jokowi's camp now has a stronger tool with which to manipulate identity politics should they prefer to. They could, for example, remind potential voters that Prabowo has ignored *Ijtima Ulama's* recommendation to choose an *ulama* as running mate. To be sure, the President's steadfast stance on harmony and tolerance will likely prevent his camp from using sectarianism. Whether or not next year's election marks the diminishing of identity politics in Indonesia's mainstream politics will thus depend on Prabowo's campaign strategy.

For Jokowi's camp, Ma'ruf Amin functions more as a "shield" against the prospect of bitter sectarian campaign that its opponent is likely to launch. Instead of identity politics, Jokowi's team will thus more likely use his economic achievements¹⁷ as the main campaign cue since the positive results of Jokowi's infrastructure programmes are becoming evident across the archipelago.

By appointing Ma'ruf Amin, President Jokowi, should he be re-elected next year, risks a challenge on his principle of religious tolerance. Indonesia's current democracy, however, seems to dictate that the President needs to "tolerate a bit of intolerance" in order to safeguard what is more important for the nation, which is economic development and good governance. Whether this will be the trademark of Indonesia's democracy in the long run remains to be seen.

¹ It is actually "pandangan dan sikap" (view and stance), not fatwa. It was issued on 11 October 2016 and signed by Ma'ruf Amin as the chairman and Anwar Abbas as general secretary. This "fatwa" led to the establishment of the Islamist group GNPF-MUI (National Movement of MUI Fatwa Defenders), provoked massive Islamist mobilization known as the "212" action, and finally the imprisonment of Ahok, a Chinese Christian Indonesian who was Jokowi's ally.

² <https://news.detik.com/berita/d-4158612/dramatis-mahfud-md-batal-jadi-cawapres-jokowi> (accessed 10/08/2018).

³ <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20180808192555-32-320668/said-aqil-mahfud-md-bukan-kader-nu> (accessed 10/08/2018).

⁴ <http://www.pikiran-rakyat.com/nasional/2018/08/10/gagal-jadi-cawapres-jokowi-simak-ungkapan-hati-mahfud-md-428594> (accessed 11/08/2018).

⁵ Norshahril Saat, "Nahdlatul Ulama's 33rd Congress: Ma'ruf Amin's Rise and its Impact on Indonesia's Traditionalist Islam", *ISEAS Perspective No. 48*, September 2015.

https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS_Perspective_2015_48.pdf (accessed 20/08/2018).

⁶ It is actually "pandangan dan sikap" (view and stance), not fatwa. It was issued on 11 October 2016 and signed by Ma'ruf Amin as the chairman and Anwar Abbas as general secretary.

⁷ Ahmad Najib Burhani's interview with Ma'ruf Amin, Koja, North Jakarta, 4 August 2012.

⁸ <https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2018/04/13/19370261/lawan-terberat-jokowi-bukan-penantangnya-tetapi-asal-bukan-jokowi> (accessed 10/08/2018)

⁹ <https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2018/02/28/18453071/survei-populi-di-kalangan-pemilih-muslim-jokowi-ungguli-prabowo> (accessed 10/-8/2018).

¹⁰ Facebook status of Uum Syarif Usman, head of PAN (national Mandate Party) of West Java, on 10 August 2018.

¹¹ However, some individual MUI elites, such as its Deputy Secretary General Zaitun Rasmin, are still among the organizers of GNPF's activities <https://news.detik.com/berita/d-3351565/mui-gnfp-bukan-bagian-kami-jangan-gunakan-atribut-mui> and <https://www.liputan6.com/news/read/2842328/ketua-mui-sebut-gnfp-tak-ada-hubungan-dengan-mui> (accessed 10/08/2018).

- ¹² <https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2018/08/20/07231701/yenny-wahid-tegaskan-nu-netral-dan-tak-berpolitik-praktis> (accessed 20/08/2018).
- ¹³ <https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2018/08/14/21334181/said-aqil-sebut-warga-nu-akan-dukung-maruf-amin-tetapi> (accessed 20/08/2018).
- ¹⁴ <https://news.detik.com/berita/d-4005382/pesan-ahok-ke-pendukung-jangan-golput-pilih-ahok-dan-sahabatnya> (accessed 10/08/2018).
- ¹⁵ <https://seword.com/politik/apakah-ahokers-sekarang-sudah-jadi-pecundang-ahoker-jadi-golput-adalah-harapan-lawan-On3rxzc1w> (accessed 10/08/2018).
- ¹⁶ <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20180810131010-32-321235/airlangga-sebut-maruf-bikin-politik-identitas-tak-laku> (accessed 11/08/2018).
- ¹⁷ Investors may response more positively towards Prabowo-Sandi, as Sandi is well-known as a successful entrepreneur. Upon the announcement of his candidacy, the stock price of Saratoga, Sandi's company, increased by 3.26%; yet this could also be due to investors general positive response to the nomination of candidates. Meanwhile, Ma'ruf Amin's stance on shari'a economy is not unknown. He was reportedly one of the drafters of MUI's *fatwa* on the Implementation of Shari's principles in the Equity Securities trading at the Stock Exchange regular market (no. 80/DSN-MUI/III/2011). See <https://tafsirq.com/fatwa/dsn-mui/penerapan-prinsip-syariahdalam-mekanisme-perdagangan-efek-bersifat-ekuitasdi-pasar-reguler-bursa-efek> (accessed 11/08/2018).

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