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Indonesia's MUI Today: Truly Moderate or Merely Pragmatic?

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Indonesian President Joko Widodo (R) speaks to journalists with new Vice President Ma'ruf Amin (L) after their inauguration at the parliament building in Jakarta on October 20, 2019. Ma'ruf Amin was the Chairman of the Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI) until 27 November 2020. Photo: Adek Berry, AFP)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Despite facing various problems since its establishment in 1975, MUI (Majelis Ulama Indonesia or Indonesian Ulama Council) continues to thrive, and has even extended its influence significantly. The National Congress 2020-2025 has refreshed its leadership and portended changes that would help the organisation's survival.
- MUI has over time adopted different roles and orientations on the relationship between state and religion. At various times, it has alternated between alignment with the government and a more critical stance in response to evolving circumstances.
- At the start of his presidency, Jokowi had a tentative and sometimes uneasy relationship with MUI. However, Jokowi realised the significance of MUI's influence during the 212 protest movement – Angkatan Bela Islam, Action to Defend Islam, and his subsequent decision to pick then MUI Chairman Ma'ruf Amin as VP running-mate helped to cement a new alliance with MUI.
- It remains to be seen whether the removal of conservative critics of Jokowi's government and the induction of moderate new faces during MUI's 2020 Congress will consolidate the recent shifts in MUI's traditional conservatism towards a more moderate outlook. The decisive factor for such a transformation would be ideological and theological conviction, rather than political pragmatism.

INTRODUCTION

On 25-27 November 2020, MUI finally held its Munas (Musyawarah Nasional, National Congress), months after it was postponed due to the Covid-19 pandemic.¹ The Congress saw the appointment of new board members for the period of 2020 to 2025. With new faces within the board members, MUI seems to indicate a future trajectory for the organization. Since its establishment in 1975, MUI has dealt with different political regimes and has been able to succeed through these years by adjusting and adapting, but also by being critical against them.

During the authoritarian era under Suharto, MUI successfully adapted² by acting as guardian of the government (*khadim al-hukuma*). After losing its main political patronage when Suharto resigned in 1998, MUI quickly adjusted to the new situation. The general chairman of MUI, Kyai Ali Yafie was one of nine national figures invited by Suharto for advice in the days just before his resignation. Kyai Ali Yafie was the first person among them to say to Suharto that the call for *reformasi* (reform) echoed in the student demonstrations was for him to resign.³ Through that incident, MUI successfully changed its tagline from *khadim al-hukuma* to *khadim al-umma* (guardian of the Muslim community).⁴ During the era of Abdurrahman Wahid (1999-2001), MUI faced serious challenges from this Indonesian president who was himself an ulama. This effectively meant MUI could not easily argue with Wahid on Islamic issues without having strong backing for its claims. In fact, Wahid proposed a reformation of MUI, but despite the challenges it had to face during this period, MUI managed to sustain its position with the government.

In the Susilo Bambang Yudoyono (SBY, 2004-2014) era, MUI was able to extend its influence on the government and the Muslim community. SBY himself provided the red carpet for MUI. For the first time MUI gained recognition from the president as the aqidah police (police for faith) and as the moral police.⁵ This recognition allowed MUI to become very dominant in matters of religion, especially in the use of Islam as a standard for public behaviour. MUI was also successful in issuing and revitalizing 14 fatwas that encouraged intolerance and discrimination towards minorities. One of these involved banning Ahmadiyyah, and significant attacks on Ahmadiyyah that took place over the last 15 years stemmed from this.⁶ SBY intentionally recruited Kyai Ma'ruf Amin, already then a key person in MUI (and currently Indonesian vice president), as a member of Wantimpres (*Dewan Pertimbangan Presiden*, President Advisory Council). That position made MUI stronger than ever before, and allowed the organization to consolidate its strength during the SBY era.

MUI IN THE JOKOWI ERA

During the Jokowi era, the position of MUI has changed again. Jokowi has never had any experience dealing with MUI prior to his presidency, not having been a national political figure before that. He was only mayor in the city of Solo and MUI, as an organization, did not have significant influence at the sub-national or regional level. Even after being elected governor of Jakarta in 2012, Jokowi during his two years in that position, was still not acquainted with MUI. In addition, some statements issued by MUI during the Jakarta gubernatorial election in 2012 were against Jokowi's candidacy, largely based on his choice of political allies. Jokowi was then supported by secular parties such as PDIP and Gerindra

and had a Christian and Chinese, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok), as his running mate. All these circumstances suggest ignorance on Jokowi's part about MUI.

In 2014, when Jokowi ran for president, MUI maintained a neutral position. This was in all likelihood due to the fact that Jokowi's running mate was Jusuf Kalla, a person who had been long acquainted with MUI leaders such as Ma'ruf Amin and Din Syamsuddin. MUI did not show any open support for Jokowi, and in fact, a few members of MUI's elite, expressed support for his opponent, Prabowo. Thus, Jokowi won the 2014 presidential election without any endorsement from MUI. In his first year as president, Jokowi implemented a policy that had direct impact on MUI. In the past, the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MORA) provided block grants for MUI.⁷ Jokowi's new financial policy left MUI's subsidies pending. This angered MUI, and some of its leaders accused Jokowi of trying to weaken MUI. Amidhan even released a statement directed at Jokowi: "*MUI cannot be weakened because ulama prioritise devotion. With or without budget from the state, MUI will continue its education to the Muslim community.*"⁸ Some MUI elites continued using the issue to criticise and delegitimise the Jokowi government.⁹

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In 2015, the Jokowi government did not dispense the yearly MUI social fund. The new regulation required grants to be decided based on detailed projects, and does not condone block grants. MUI agreed in 2016 to follow the new budget proposal policy from Jokowi's government, and began receiving a budget grant from the government. The relationship between Jokowi and MUI remained distant. On 27 November 2016, Basuki Tjahaja Utama (Ahok), the governor of Jakarta, visited fishermen on the island of Pramuka, part of Kepulauan Seribu.¹⁰ He delivered his talk that touched on some sensitive issues. The opponents of Ahok, mostly from Islamist groups such as FPI (Front Pembela Islam, Islam-Defender Front) used this matter to file a legal case, charging him with blasphemy against Islam.¹¹ Where Jokowi stood on this issue was yet unclear to these groups.

MUI issued a statement called *Pendapat dan Sikap Keagamaan Majelis Ulama Indonesia* (Religious Opinion and Stance of Council of Indonesian Ulama).¹² This was not a fatwa, but Ma'ruf Amin (General Chairman of MUI 2015-2020) argued that this Religious Opinion and Stance of MUI had higher authority than a fatwa.¹³ In this MUI statement, the speech of Ahok was considered a blasphemous act against Islam, and sought serious action to be taken against anyone committing blasphemy against Islam. The statement motivated Islamist groups to set up a pressure group known as GNPF-MUI (Gerakan Nasional Pengawal Fatwa MUI, National Movement of MUI Fatwa Guard). MUI however stated it was not part of GNPF-MUI despite the use of its name. This did not lessen support for the Islamist groups on the streets.¹⁴ This incident reflected MUI's carelessness and opportunism in giving official statements.

Be that as it may, the Ahok case, the MUI's Religious Opinion and Stance, and the 212 movement made Jokowi fully aware of MUI's strong position in the country. Jokowi and Ma'ruf Amin sought a rapprochement to soften the impact of the 212 movement, which had begun to target not only Ahok but also Jokowi. Jokowi felt that MUI could be persuaded to be his new ally and MUI felt that having a good relationship with Jokowi would increase its bargaining position with the government.

SADIQUL HUKUMA

Jokowi decided at the last minute on Ma'ruf Amin as his vice-presidential candidate in 2019. This decision, of course, shocked many people and disappointed some of his loyal supporters. Many claimed that Jokowi had embraced his enemy. Ma'ruf Amin and MUI had been perceived as a very critical group that had been attacking Jokowi's policies through the Ahok incident. But when Ma'ruf Amin officially became Jokowi's running mate, MUI began active campaigning for the Jokowi-Ma'ruf pair. After Jokowi-Ma'ruf's landslide win, it began referring to itself as *sadiq al-hukuma* (friend of the government).¹⁵ However, the term *sadiq al-hukuma* also connotes someone prepared to justify government policy (*tasdiq*, Arabic). Ma'ruf's position as vice-president has softened MUI's stance towards Jokowi.

In MUI, there are at least three blocks of influential groups. The largest group are those who have Nahdlatul Ulama as their organization background. The second group are those who come from Muhammadiyah. The third consists of those associated with small Muslim organizations such as DDII, Math'laul Anwar, al-Wasliyah, Perti and many others. Those who have been critical about the Jokowi-MUI partnership are mainly those from Muhammadiyah and from small Muslim organizations such as Din Syamsuddin, Muhyiddin Junaidi¹⁶, Bachtiar Natsir, Tengku Zulkarnaen and some others. Following the 2020 Munas, these figures are no longer part of MUI.

MODERATION OR PRAGMATISM?

MUI has been promoting the concept of *wasatiyyah Islam* (moderate Islam)¹⁷ for more than five years. This concept was introduced in response to the competing narratives promoted by Muslim organizations such as Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama, which advocate "Islam Berkemajuan" and "Islam Nusantara" respectively. Besides, MUI also wants to show that it is not promoting radicalism, extremism and jihadism. There are fundamental characteristics of *wasatiyyah Islam* such as *tawasut* (moderate), *tawazun* (balance), *i'tidal* (straight), *tasamuh* (tolerance), *musawah* (egalitarian), *shura* (democracy), *islah* (reform), *awlawiyyah* (prioritising correctly), *tatawwur wa ibtikar* (dynamic, creative and innovative) and *tahaddur* (civilised). These reflect the inclusive and pluralist stance of MUI. However, after launching *wasatiyyah Islam*, the stance of MUI has not changed much in its dealings with other Muslim groupings. It continues to portray Ahmadiyyah as a deviant sect and warns Muslims to beware of Syi'ah, as well as many others. Apparently, *wasatiyyah Islam* still operates at the conceptual level and has yet to move down to practical aspects of daily life. One could say that MUI is theoretically moderate, but practically conservative.

The new composition of MUI's board members reflects its position of being a 'perfect friend' of the government.¹⁸ Some figures who had criticised Jokowi in the past were not appointed as MUI board members at the Munas (National Congress) 2020. These included figures such as Din Syamsuddin (the presidium of KAMI, Koalisi Aksi Menyelamatkan Bangsa, Coalition of Action for Saving Nation), Tengku Zulkarnain (the representative of Mathla'ul Anwar), Bachtiar Natsir (an important figure behind the 212 movement).¹⁹ Their absence from the new MUI board consolidates the organisation's support for the Jokowi-

Ma'ruf government. This current circumstance of MUI is thus somewhat similar to the role of MUI in the Suharto era when it was *khadim al-hukuma* (guardian of the government).

With its new face, many hope that MUI will shift away from conservatism towards moderatism, and become an inclusive and pluralist ulama organisation. At the very least, some hope that MUI would promote the tenets of *wasatiyyah Islam*. However, the history of MUI shows constant strategic shifts in its roles. Established to promote Islam in Indonesia, MUI's role is to apply sharia to its various degrees. Sharia itself, however, has always had two inclinations; it has a conservative side as well as a moderate side. The hope is that MUI can become a moderate and inclusive organisation and demonstrate consistency in its behaviour to ensure an appropriate interpretation of the sharia for later generations.

CONCLUSION

MUI's board members are changed every five years, and the new board (2020-2025) has raised hopes that new changes are at hand.

There is a possibility for MUI to shift to a moderate orientation. The new board may also see it becoming a good supporter of the government. By replacing conservative figures on its board with moderate ones, MUI may wish to show to it has shifted from being conservative to being moderate. However, if the swing is driven by political rather than ideological concerns, instead of being moderate, MUI could be pragmatic instead.

¹ See <https://republika.co.id/berita/qjbjt8366/ini-deretan-kandidat-ketua-umum-mui-2020>, viewed on 3 December 2020. Other organizations postponed their meetings because of Covid-19. Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama postponed their Mukhtamar which should be held in 2019 to an unfixed time.

² See Muhammad Atho Mudzhar, *Fatwa of the Council of Indonesian Ulama: A Study of Islamic Legal Thought in Indonesia 1975-1988* (Jakarta: INIS, 1993); Wahiduddin Adams, *Pola Penyerapan Fatwa Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI) Dalam Peraturan Perundang-Undangan 1975-1997* (Jakarta: Departemen Agama, 2004); Syafiq Hasyim, "Fatwas and Democracy: Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI, Indonesian Ulama Council) and Rising Conservatism in Indonesian Islam," *TRANS: Trans -Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia* 8, no. 1 (2020): 21–35, <https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2019.13>.

³ This information was provided me directly by Kyai Ali Yafie when I was doing my PhD fieldwork in 2010.

⁴ Syafiq Hasyim, "The Council of Indonesian Ulama (MUI) and Aqidah-Based Intolerance: A Critical Analysis of Its Fatwa on Ahmadiyah and 'Sepilis,'" in *Religion, Law and Intolerance in Indonesia*, ed. Tim Lindsey and Helen Pausacker (New York: Routledge, 2016), 211–33.

⁵ Hasyim, p. 215. See also Syafiq Hasyim, "Fatwa Aliran Sesat Dan Politik Hukum Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI)," *Al-Ahkam* 25, no. 2 (2015): 241–66.

⁶ MUI, *Mengawal Aqidah Umat: Fatwa MUI Tentang Aliran-Aliran Sesat Di Indonesia* (Jakarta: Sekretariat Majelis Ulama Indonesia, n.d.); Hasyim, "The Council of Indonesian Ulama (MUI) and Aqidah-Based Intolerance: A Critical Analysis of Its Fatwa on Ahmadiyah and 'Sepilis.'"

⁷ <https://nasional.tempo.co/read/466549/tiap-tahun-mui-terima-rp-3-miliar-dana-apbn>, viewed on 14 December 2020.

⁸ <https://www.merdeka.com/peristiwa/jokowi-belum-cairkan-dana-bansos-buat-mui-sebesar-rp-3-m.html>, viewed on 1 December 2020.

⁹ See <http://dakta.com/news/111/pemerintah-jokowi-hentikan-bantuan-ke-mui>, viewed on 6 December 2020.

¹⁰ <https://www.bbc.com/indonesia/indonesia-37996601>, viewed on 14 December 2020.

¹¹ <https://republika.co.id/berita/om302o330/penjelasan-habib-rizieq-terkait-pidato-ahok-menyinggung-almaidah-51>, viewed on 14 December 2020.

¹² <https://news.detik.com/berita/d-3318150/mui-nyatakan-sikap-soal-ucapan-ahok-terkait-al-maidah-51-ini-isinya>, viewed on 1 December 2020.

- ¹³ <https://news.detik.com/berita/d-3318150/mui-nyatakan-sikap-soal-ucapan-ahok-terkait-al-maidah-51-ini-isinya>, viewed on 1 December 2020.
- ¹⁴ <https://www.wartaekonomi.co.id/read204793/maruf-amin-klaim-212-itu-buatannya-gnpf-ulama-diwaspadai>, viewed on 14 December 2020.
- ¹⁵ <https://www.madaninews.id/2607/tiga-peran-mui-sebagai-shodiqul-hukumah-khidmatul-dan-himayatul-ummah.html>, viewed on 6 December 2020.
- ¹⁶ <https://republika.co.id/berita/qga1lt396/waketum-mui-tolak-sertifikasi-ulama>, <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20201027090242-20-563102/wakil-ketua-mui-banyak-pihak-yang-sangat-merindukan-rizieq>, viewed on 6 December 2020.
- ¹⁷ <https://mui.or.id/bimbingan-syariah/paradigma-islam/28522/apa-yang-dimaksud-islam-wasathiyah-2/>, viewed on 5 December 2020.
- ¹⁸ <https://www.wartaekonomi.co.id/read316130/menyambut-era-baru-pengurus-mui-sehati-dengan-jokowi>, viewed on 6 December 2020.
- ¹⁹ <https://makassar.terkini.id/din-syamsuddin-bachtiar-nasir-hingga-tengku-zul-terdepak-dari-kepengurusan-mui-yang-baru/>, <https://kabarjoglosemar.pikiran-rakyat.com/news/pr-731023899/tak-ada-din-tengku-zul-dan-bachtiar-nasir-di-mui-ini-susunan-mui-2020>, <https://news.detik.com/berita/d-5271799/gerbong-212-tak-lagi-ada-di-kepengurusan-mui>, viewed on 3 December 2020.

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