

RESEARCHERS AT SINGAPORE'S INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES SHARE THEIR UNDERSTANDING OF CURRENT EVENTS

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### **The Islamic Factor in the 2014 Indonesian Elections**

*By Gwenael Njoto-Feillard\**

#### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Islamic parties in Indonesia had recently been deemed to be on the decline, but the parliamentary election in April has shown their resilience. This does not mean, however, that radical Islam is on the rise in Indonesia, since most of the Islamic parties that cleared the electoral threshold can be considered pluralist or at least reflect a moderate form of Islamism.
- Initiatives to form a united Islamic front ahead of the presidential elections in July have so far been unsuccessful. Besides divergent interests, ideological differences seem to present an obstacle to this alliance. Conservative Islam is divided as well, but most movements consider Gerindra's Prabowo Subianto as an Islam-friendly candidate, in contrast to PDI-P's Joko Widodo, who is presented by some as the candidate of "unbelievers" and "foreign interests".
- It remains to be seen whether Joko Widodo's rivals will indeed openly play the religious card against him. Acknowledging the Indonesian population's overall resilience to radical discourse, such a strategy can backfire.

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- Joko Widodo (Jokowi) is currently carefully managing his Islamic credentials to parry such accusations from his rivals. Jusuf Kalla – known to be a pious Muslim, and also a popular and seasoned politician – is now considered by many to be the ideal running mate for Jokowi in the presidential elections in July.

## INTRODUCTION

One of the main surprises from the recently held legislative elections in Indonesia (9 April 2014) was the better-than-expected performance of Islamic parties.<sup>1</sup> Taken together, they managed to garner around 32% of the vote share (as against close to 29% in 2009).<sup>2</sup> Multiple polling institutions had announced for some time that such parties were going to fare poorly. The Prosperous Justice Party (Partai Keadilan Sejahtera, PKS) had been embroiled in a beef graft import scandal in 2013, while the botched experiment of Islamism in the Middle East, following the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings, did not signal anything positive for the advancement of political Islam in Indonesia. However, PKS managed to limit the damage (winning around 6.9 % of the votes, down from 7.88 % in 2009) by interpreting the graft scandal as a conspiracy against the party and by relying on its long-term charity strategy on the local level, a common feature of Islamist movements.<sup>3</sup> For sympathizers, whatever happened in Jakarta could not nullify the dedication of PKS cadres in helping communities in dire times, such as the 2013 Jakarta floods or the eruption of Sinabung volcano in 2014. The other important surprise was the National Awakening Party's (Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa, PKB) success in recovering its constituency within the traditionalist organisation Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), garnering about 9 % of the vote. The United Development Party (Partai Persatuan Pembangunan, PPP - 6.7 %) and the National Mandate Party (Partai Amanat Nasional, PAN - 7.5 %) have similarly managed to establish themselves as mid-sized parties, whose support will be key to the "big three": PDIP, Golkar and Gerindra. The Crescent and Star Party (Partai Bulan Bintang, PBB - 1.6 %), the only true conservative Islamist party, did not manage to pass the electoral threshold of 3.5 %.

With July's presidential elections looming, have the results of the legislative elections shown that political Islam is still a force to be reckoned with? While the current volatility of political manoeuvring makes predictions on future coalitions rather risky, past events may give us hints of things to come.

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<sup>1</sup> For an analysis of the preliminary results of the legislative election (based on the quick count method), see Alexander Arifianto, "Unpacking the Results of the 2014 Indonesian Legislative Election", *ISEAS Perspective*, no. 24, 17 April 2014 ; see also Max Lane, "Indonesia's 2014 Legislative Elections: The Dilemmas of 'Elektabilitas' Politics", *ISEAS Perspective*, no. 25, 23 April 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Vote results quoted in this document are the quick count results from the Cyrus-CSIS institutes ([www.detik.com](http://www.detik.com)).

<sup>3</sup> Various interviews with PKS members and sympathizers at Gelora Bung Karno campaign meeting in Jakarta, March 2014.

## AN ALLIANCE OF ISLAMIC PARTIES?

One could ask whether the 32% vote share can translate into some form of unity for the coming presidential elections. After all, an alliance of all Islamic parties has been repeatedly called for by some major figures of Indonesian Islam. Among them is PAN's Amien Rais, who was at the helm of the 1999 "Central Axis" (Poros Tengah) that brought Abdurrahman Wahid to power, in a shared dislike of Megawati Soekarnoputri. While Amien Rais now has declared himself favourable to a new alliance, he has also admitted that significant obstacles remain.<sup>4</sup> First, there is no popular figure in sight who can unite Indonesia's Islamic parties. Second, a united stance seems difficult to achieve even within the Islamic parties themselves.<sup>5</sup> The clearest example of this problem is the recent internal rift in the PPP following the official support of its chairman, Suryadharma Ali (SDA), for Prabowo's candidacy. To avoid a major rift within the party, a national meeting cancelled all previous decisions, including SDA's support for Prabowo.<sup>6</sup>

Besides Amien Rais, one of the most vocal figures in favour of the creation of an Islamic coalition has been Din Syamsuddin, head of the reformist organization Muhammadiyah and of the Council of Indonesian Ulama (MUI, Majelis Ulama Indonesia). On 21 April, around 30 Islamic organizations gathered at MUI's headquarters in Jakarta to declare their support for an alliance.<sup>7</sup> For some time now, MUI has been strategising to re-establish its authority and present itself as "the true defender of the Islamic *ummah*",<sup>8</sup> it was no surprise to see the organisation at the forefront of the initiative.<sup>9</sup> As for Din Syamsuddin's eagerness to see a unitary front of Islamic parties, it seems to be motivated more by his position in MUI or his personal political views than by an official positioning of his organisation, Muhammadiyah, which historically has avoided too direct an involvement in national politics.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> In the meantime, he has declared that he was personally supporting Prabowo Subianto, as Gerindra's candidate was the only one who could "protect" Indonesia from foreign economic interests (quoted are the World Bank, the IMF and the WTO) <http://pemilu.tempo.co/read/news/2014/04/27/270573529/Puja-puji-Amien-Rais-Buat-Prabowo>.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Bahtiar Effendy, Jakarta, 20 March 2014 and Interview with Andar Nubowo, Jakarta, 20 March 2014.

<sup>6</sup> In 2009, PPP had already experienced such an incident, supporting Prabowo, then retracting its support.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.antarane.ws.com/berita/431324/din-syamsuddin-poros-islam-sulit-terwujud>.

<sup>8</sup> Moch Nur Ichwan, "Towards a Puritanical Moderate Islam: The Majelis Ulama Indonesia and the Politics of Religious Orthodoxy" in Martin van Bruinessen (ed.), *Contemporary Developments in Indonesian Islam: Explaining the Conservative Turn*, Singapore, ISEAS, 2013.

<sup>9</sup> MUI was created in 1971 as a semi-governmental organization by the New Order regime to give further religious justification to its policies. MUI's main purpose was to issue "judicial advices" (fatwa) in Islamic jurisprudence. However, since the fall of the New Order, it has taken a more central role in the religious, but also political and economic fields. MUI is in charge of the highly lucrative sector of halal certification.

<sup>10</sup> Eunsook Jung, "Islamic Organizations and Electoral Politics: The Case of Muhammadiyah", *Southeast Asia Research*, vol. 22, no. 1, 2014, p. 73-86.

Realising that an “Islamic alliance” without the now largest Islamic party, the National Awakening Party (PKB), would leave the initiative rather ineffective, Din Syamsuddin has proposed that the PKB take the helm of the possible alliance. However, the PKB leadership has so far shown no interest in taking such a role or even to support the initiative. Besides the fact that the PKB has probably more to gain in joining relatively secure political alliances (notably with PDIP), it seems its leaders are wary of an Islamic front that would be in a position to challenge the Indonesian secularist model. NU Chairman Said Aqil Siraj argues that “*the question of religion and the State has been settled in Indonesia in contradistinction with the Middle East*”, and the “*dichotomy between Islamic and nationalist parties*” is thus over and should not be revived.<sup>11</sup> The memory of various rifts involving Islamic parties – starting in the early 1950s (Masyumi), then in the 1980s (PPP), and then the ouster of President Abdurrahman Wahid in 2001 – could also be in the minds of the NU leaders.<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, the failed Islamist experiment in the Middle East following the uprisings in 2011 and the violence that ensued also seem to have persuaded the NU/PKB leadership that Indonesia’s tolerant model needs to be upheld. In a campaign video, featuring Indonesian-Chinese entrepreneur Rusdi Kirana<sup>13</sup> promoting religious harmony in Indonesia, Said Aqil Siraj declared: “*We are not like the Middle East or South Asia. We, the Nahdlatul Ulama, have been the foundation of a Nation that is more tolerant and peaceful*”.<sup>14</sup> In the background, video extracts of fighting in Syria were being shown.

It is also noteworthy that the Nahdlatul Ulama has complained of being confronted with tactics of infiltration from other organisations, such as the moderate Islamist party PKS or the trans-national movement Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia. Now clearly conscious of the problem, NU circles have adopted an anti-Wahhabi strategy and more generally an anti-radical Islam discourse.<sup>15</sup> Today, these ideological schisms pose

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.muslimedienews.com/2014/04/islam-tidak-perlu-diformalkan-tapi.html?m=1>.

<sup>12</sup> The NU became a separate political party in 1952, leaving the Masyumi after a rift concerning mostly the post of Minister of Religious Affairs which Reformists and Traditionalists were competing for. In the early 1980s, the NU decided to leave the Islamic political party PPP after continued conflicts with other groups within the party. In 2001, Abdurrahman Wahid was ousted as President of Indonesia after a move by Amien Rais to convene the MPR to unseat him, this only two years after making him his choice as President against competitor Megawati Soekarnoputri. The NU kyais often relate these events as moments when they were used and then belittled systematically by other Muslim politicians.

<sup>13</sup> Rusdi Kirana, founder of Lion Air, Indonesia’s fastest growing airline, joined the PKB as deputy-chairman in January 2104 and has been financing the party’s campaign since then. For more details, see Greg Fealy, “The Lion of PKB: Rusdi Kirana”, 31 March 2014 <http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/2014/03/31/the-lion-of-pkb-rusdi-kirana/>.

<sup>14</sup> [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LyU0SI3fzJo&feature=youtube\\_gdata\\_player](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LyU0SI3fzJo&feature=youtube_gdata_player).

<sup>15</sup> The idea that a puritanical form of Islam coming from the Middle East poses a threat to traditionalist Islam was present at different moments of Indonesian history. This was the case during the early 20th century evidently, when NU was formed to defend against Reformism. The religious revival of the 1990s was another key moment. For more details on this subject, see Martin van Bruinessen, “Ghazwul fikri or Arabisation? Indonesian Muslim responses to globalisation”, in Ken Miichi and Omar Farouk (eds), *Dynamics of Southeast Asian Muslims in the era of globalization*, Tokyo, Japan International Cooperation Agency Research Institute (JICA-RI), 2013, p. 47-70.

an additional obstacle to the formation of a united and sustainable front of Islamic parties.

If one is to read the most recent declarations of their leaders, the PDIP and the PKB seem close to officially announcing their alliance. It remains to be seen whether the local power base of NU, i.e. the *kyais* (religious leaders of Islamic boarding schools or *pesantren*), will throw their support behind Jokowi. Much depends on the choice of his vice-presidential candidate. Some *kyais* could be susceptible to the claims of Jokowi detractors that have been constantly presenting the Jakarta governor as not being a good Muslim, sometimes even a Christian or, at best, a nominal Muslim (*abangan*). This is probably why the PDIP has been careful to give an important Islamic dimension to Jokowi's campaign (visiting the *kyais*, the tombs of Muslim saints, etc.) and considers Jusuf Kalla, who is known to be a pious Muslim, a possible vice-presidential candidate.

## THE "ANTI-JOKOWI EFFECT"

For the moment, the strategy of Gerindra has been to present Jokowi as a candidate with no track-record and a mere puppet within the PDIP. The PDIP itself has been portrayed by Gerindra as being untrustworthy, referring to the Batu Tulis agreement of 2009, where Megawati supposedly promised to endorse Prabowo in 2014 in return for his support as her vice-presidential candidate. Presenting Jokowi as a mere nominal Muslim (*abangan*) and the PDIP as being on the left of the political spectrum can sway more votes in favour of Prabowo, especially in rural Java, where the *kyais* seem to be more receptive to this kind of discourse and may see Prabowo's militaristic past in a rather positive light.<sup>16</sup> This type of strategy may backfire, though, since a confrontational approach is generally not favoured by the Indonesian public.

However, among the more conservative elements of Indonesian Islam, this type of antagonistic discourse towards Jokowi and the PDIP has been widespread for quite some time. All currents seem to unite in their opposition to Jokowi's possible presidency. In the words of K.H. Kholil Ridwan, one of MUI's leaders, Jokowi is "not a real Muslim" and permits non-Muslims (Christians) to govern Muslims,<sup>17</sup> which for him means that an "anything-but-Jokowi" strategy is needed in the run-up to the presiden-

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For the recent conceptualisation of a form of Indonesian "moderate Islam" in opposition to foreign "radical Islam", see: <http://www.muslimmedianews.com/2014/03/allahu-akbar-konferensi-ulama-keluarkan.html?m=1>.

<sup>16</sup> It is noteworthy as well that in the early 2000s, collaborators of Prabowo were courting the rural *pesantren* milieu & peasants association in Java through the fertilizing business. Personal observations from a field-trip in Sunan Drajat Pesantren in East-Java in 2003.

<sup>17</sup> Here, he is referring to the fact that Jokowi's deputy-governor of the Greater Jakarta Province is Basuki Tjahaja Purnama ("Ahok"), an Indonesian-Chinese and practicing Protestant. If Jokowi gets elected president of the Republic, Ahok will become in effect the governor of Jakarta, a possibility that the conservatives clearly dread. Another case is the one of Susan Jasmine Zulfikri, a Catholic and local civil servant (*lurah*), whose administrative authority on Muslims has been challenged by the FPI.

tial elections.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, the PDIP candidate has been accused of multiple misdeeds by various currents of conservative Islam, such as being financed by Indonesian-Chinese conglomerates (notably James Riady, CEO of the Lippo Group), Christian missionaries, freemasons and the Rotary Club.<sup>19</sup> Jokowi's recent meeting with foreign ambassadors, at the initiative of Indonesian-Chinese entrepreneur Jacob Soetoyo's<sup>20</sup>, was seen as proof that the PDIP candidate was amenable to foreign interests, especially those of the United States.<sup>21</sup> It is notable that this type of wild propaganda can strike a chord in some circles and not only in radical ones. A flurry of text messages with such contents have been circulating for quite some time, even in Muslim circles which would be considered "moderate".

The question remains whether Jokowi's rivals will take advantage of this already established and active opposition front. In the mid-1990s, Prabowo Subianto was known to have links with ultra-conservative elements of Indonesian Islam.<sup>22</sup> He had approached DDII (Indonesian Council of Proselytisation) and KISDI (Indonesian Committee for Solidarity with the Islamic World) for support of President Soeharto in 1996. While Prabowo has recently shown a relative readiness to take into account the voices of the more radical elements of Indonesian Islam such as the FPI,<sup>23</sup> he has also been keen on reassuring the Christians/Indonesian-Chinese community of his noble and peaceful intentions. His brother and financier, Hashim Djojohadikusumo, a Christian, has also been presenting Prabowo as the guarantor of ethnic and religious harmony in Indonesia.<sup>24</sup> Thus, it is difficult to know for the moment whether the Gerindra candidate would consider the pro-ultra-conservative strategy to be fruitful or whether he even shares the radicals' ideological orientations. What is clear however is that the latter are rooting for him against Jokowi and the PDI-P, seen as the enemies of Islamic interests.

Some Indonesian scholars have already voiced their concern over the possible religious agenda of Gerindra in attracting conservative forces.<sup>25</sup> Airlangga Pribadi, of Airlangga University in Surabaya, noted that Gerindra's manifesto includes ambiguous principles that risk endangering the secular foundation of the Indonesian State,

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<sup>18</sup> <http://www.voaislam.com/read/indonesiana/2014/04/13/29841/ketua-mui-kiai-kholil-ridwan-karena-jokowi-jakarta-akan-jatuh-ke-ahok/#sthash.o9qfrjyl.6OALMf9r.dpbs>.

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.voaislam.com/read/indonesiana/2014/04/11/29826/inilah-dosa-mega-dan-jokowi/#sthash.rcLEm2A9.elvxQDhN.dpbs>.

<sup>20</sup> Jacob Soetoyo is president director and commissioner for a number of companies under the umbrella of the Gesit Group. One of these companies is PT. Gesit Sarana Perkasa, the owner of the luxury hotel project "JS Luwansa" in Kuningan, South Jakarta. <http://news.detik.com/read/2014/04/15/025239/2555134/10/siapa-jacob-soetoyo-yang-pertemuan-jokowi-mega-dan-dubes-asing>.

<sup>21</sup> <http://hizbut-tahrir.or.id/2014/04/15/jokowi-bertemu-dubes-asing-kedaulatan-indonesia-terancam/>;  
<http://www.republika.co.id/berita/pemilu/menju-ri-1/14/04/16/n42kvy-temui-wakil-vatikan-jokowi-disebut-serahkan-leher-ke-asing>.

<sup>22</sup> Robert W. Hefner, *Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2000, p. 201.

<sup>23</sup> <http://suara.com/news/2014/04/16/125856/fpi-ajukan-syarat-sebelum-berikan-dukungan-kepada-prabowo/>.

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.thejakartaglobe.com/news/prabowos-brother-gives-sby-f-minus-on-religious-tolerance/>.

<sup>25</sup> <http://pemilu.tempo.co/read/news/2014/04/27/270573645/Berbagai-Ketakutan-jika-Prabowo-Jadi-Presiden>.



as the party declared that one of the tasks of the State is to “*guarantee the purity of religious teachings that are recognized by the State (and protect this purity) from deviations and contempt from other religious teachings*”.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, Najib Burhani, a researcher at Indonesia’s National Institute of Sciences (LIPI), warned that the presidency of Prabowo could pose a threat to religious pluralism in Indonesia.<sup>27</sup>

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Islam is surely not the only factor having sway in the elections, but it is an important one. The two largest Islamic organisations in Indonesia, the Nahdlatul Ulama and the Muhammadiyah, have historically occupied socio-religious space in such a way that they have posed an obstacle to the growth of conservative forms of Islam from the Middle East.<sup>28</sup> Here again, they will play significant roles, especially in the case of Nahdlatul Ulama, which is courted by both the PDI-P and Gerindra.

Coalition building, however, sometimes overshadows the fact that Indonesian voters will not necessarily follow their parties’ choice in the presidential race or respond positively to tactics based on religious persuasions. Quite paradoxically, and as has been happening in other parts of the Muslim World, by entering the political and economic spheres,<sup>29</sup> religion has been secularized and, in a way, desacralized. The elections in July will show how far this is the case, making their results an important marker in the fluctuating relation between religion and the State in this Muslim-majority country.

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<sup>26</sup> “Menjamin kemurnian ajaran agama yang diakui oleh negara dari segala bentuk penistaan dan penyelewengan dari ajaran agama” <http://pemilu.tempo.co/read/news/2014/04/27/270573645/Berbagai-Ketakutan-jika-Prabowo-Jadi-Presiden>.

<sup>27</sup> “Peneliti LIPI: Kaum Minoritas Terancam Jika Prabowo Presiden”, *tribunnews.com*, 25 April 2014. <http://www.tribunnews.com/pemilu-2014/2014/04/25/peneliti-lipi-kaum-minoritas-terancam-jika-prabowo-presiden>.

<sup>28</sup> Vedi R. Hadiz, “No Turkish Delight: The Impasse of Islamic Party Politics in Indonesia”, *Indonesia*, vol. 92, 2011, p. 1-18.

<sup>29</sup> Greg Fealy and Sally White, *Expressing Islam: Religious Life and Politics in Indonesia*, Indonesia Update Series, Singapore, ISEAS, 2008.

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