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The Dilemma of Political Involvement among Muslim Theologians in Indonesia

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Indonesian Muslims attend the Eid al-Adha prayer at the square of the Great Mosque of Al Azhar, Jakarta, Indonesia, on 28 June 2023. Dasril Roszandi/Anadolu Agency (Photo by Dasril Roszandi / ANADOLU AGENCY/Anadolu Agency via AFP).

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Under Suharto’s New Order regime (1966-1998), Indonesian religious elites generally did not join formal politics or elections apart from the avenues sanctioned by the government. All Islamic political parties—of different ideologies—were grouped under the PPP (United Development Party).
- Between the 1970s and late 1990s, Nurcholish Madjid’s (Cak Nur) “Islam Yes, Islamic Politics No” shaped Indonesia’s Islamic political discourse. The more politically inclined theologians (including those from Nahdlatul Ulama, NU) joined PPP, while others who wished to make their voices heard in policymaking participated in state-formed religious institutions.
- After 1998, and under a more democratic setting, religious elites have remained divided regarding political participation. Some shun it, and prefer not to be associated with any politicians or parties, for fear of the “corruption” of their religious ideas. Some openly endorse political parties, advocate clear political roles for themselves and lobby their allies for political positions, in the name of advancing Islamic goals.
- This article discusses whether the religious elite in Indonesia is tilting towards approving direct political participation. With the election season in Indonesia due in early 2024, identity or pietistic politics is gaining more importance than ever. Yet, some religious elites prefer to focus on upholding Islamic ideals and keep their distance from politics, thereby eschewing the potential benefits of political patronage.

INTRODUCTION

In Indonesia, Islamic religious elites' views on the role of religion in politics have garnered attention since the fall of the New Order in 1998. From the 1970s to the late 1990s, Islamic political parties such as Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Partai Islam Persatuan Tarbiyah Islamiyah (PERTI), Partai Syarikat Islam Indonesia (PSII) and Partai Muslimin Indonesia (PARMUSI) could only function under a single party, the United Development Party (PPP). In 1984, NU officially withdrew from formal politics after its chairman Abdurahman Wahid (or Gus Dur) declared that the organisation *Kembali ke Khittah* (Return to Khittah), should return to its original roots and focus on Islamic education and welfare.

The fall of Suharto triggered the democratisation process, which brought Islamic political parties other than PPP to the forefront of Indonesia's political scene. The blossoming of Islamic political parties since 1998 is well documented. Even NU and Muhammadiyah members participated in the electoral process through new vehicles like PKB (National Awakening Party) and PAN (National Mandate Party) respectively. There has been a blurring between political and religious figures (including the ulama) ever since; for example, Gus Dur, who had shunned electoral politics previously, formed the PKB and eventually became Indonesia's fourth president in 1999. Similarly, Muhammadiyah Chairman Amien Rais participated in the election via PAN, and between 1999-2004, was elected to be the speaker of MPR (People's Consultative Assembly).

This article focuses on a different group of Muslim influencers or trendsetters in Indonesia, namely the religious elites or theologians, and their attitudes towards political involvement. They include the ulama (scholars), popular preachers, and ordinary religious teachers who are not career politicians. Their authority lies with the religious schools (*pesantrens* or madrasahs). Today, they have moved beyond the confines of the religious schools and utilise alternative platforms such as travelling roadshows and social media. This analysis contends that there has always been a diversity of views regarding the role that theologians should play in electoral politics, and the question today is, will more religious figures be swayed to participate in political campaigns in the 2024 elections? To be sure, the gulf between religious elites who shun politics and those who are neutral or actively supporting it remains. The former continues to believe that politics undermine their authority and spirituality, even if staying out means missing out on funding opportunities and acquiring positions of power, which the latter consider to be necessary for the betterment of the *ummah*.

ISLAM'S VIEW ON POLITICS

Muslims believe that Islam is all-encompassing, as reflected in the Quranic verse that the religion is *ad deen* or a way of life. However, Islamic scriptures do not always speak about all matters in detail, and mainly offer general ideas and principles. Islamic scholars then interpret texts to suit the time and spaces in which they live.

The Muslim resurgence movement that began in the 1970s advanced a different approach altogether: that Islam offers alternative systems to the West, which it deems "secular". A faction of the movement believed in upholding shariah laws and forming an Islamic state. Political scientists refer to this faction as political Islamists. Today, another faction is gaining

ground, shifting the discourse towards post-Islamism. Though not negating Islam's comprehensiveness as opposed to Western political thought, post-Islamists believe Muslims should focus more on community work and developing shariah-compliant lifestyles rather than pushing for hard rules in the form of a state.

On the other hand, the progressives underscore moral values like justice, honesty, equality, and moderation to be the essence of Islam's comprehensiveness. They argue that the Quran and Sunnah (sayings of the Prophet Muhammad and his behaviour during his lifetime, which has become a source of law and guidance to contemporary Muslims) do not stipulate clear injunctions to establish a particular form of government, neither do these call for the formation of Islamic parties. The political Islamists do not disagree with these values, but the progressives accept that modern political and social concepts—such as constitutions, liberal democracy, separation of powers, rule of law and checks and balances—also manifest these principles.

Today, Indonesia is a functioning democracy with the largest Muslim population in the world, where political parties are vehicles for direct electoral participation. Contemporary Indonesian theologians do not question the existence of Islamic political parties, but their attitude towards what role religious elites should play in them vary. Some support direct political participation and political parties that concurrently promote Islamic values, while others choose to keep a distance from politics altogether. In this article, we select several religious elites to illustrate the main attitudes towards politics which they hold. We choose religious elites instead of career politicians because the masses consider the former to be more authoritative when speaking about Islam. Also, theologians are community leaders whom aspiring politicians wish to engage and cultivate good relations with.

CONTENTION OVER AN ISLAMIC PARTY

At the most basic, there exists a steadfast view to which many subscribe, about the inseparability of Islam and politics. In the past, disagreements depended on whether Islamic parties should even exist (they did not exist 14 centuries ago during Prophet Muhammad's lifetime). Abdul Wahab Chasbullah (b.1889-d.1971), a key NU kyai of the past, suggested that trying to separate politics from Islam was a futile endeavour, akin to wanting to separate sugar and sweetness.¹ This view by a senior NU cleric became the doctrinal foundation for the existence of Islamic parties, including NU, which was actively involved in electoral politics in the 1955 election, and in elections in 1970s.

By the early 1970s, there was already a cultural campaign to distinguish Islam from politics. Nurcholish Madjid, a celebrated Muslim intellectual popularly known as Cak Nur, coined the famous slogan "Islam Yes, Islamic Party No!"² In line with the progressives' thinking, this captured the preference for Islamic moral teachings over political and symbolic expressions of Islam.³ Cak Nur was a student of progressive thinker Professor Fazlur Rahman of the Chicago University. He later developed Indonesia's intellectual reformist tradition, earning him the name Guru Bangsa (the Nation's Teacher). Many Indonesian Muslims concur with Cak Nur's guide; to the extent that nationalist parties have always dominated the legislative assembly since independence. In 1984, NU too withdrew from PPP and elections. By then, it had come clear that the Suharto regime was unequivocally sidelining the Islamic parties; but more than

that, the Indonesian public had become very familiarised with the separation of Islam from party politics which Cak Nur advanced.

Unsurprisingly, several Muslim politicians have been displeased with Cak Nur's slogan to this day. Instead, they advance the notion that Muslims must vote for Islamic parties as this is in accordance with Islamic teachings.⁴ Former minister of religion and chairman of PPP, Suryadharma Ali, called Cak Nur's slogan "a poison".⁵ He compared the slogan to mean abandoning Muslims' responsibility to promote Islamic interests.⁶

Some attempted to belittle Cak Nur's credibility by highlighting his inconsistency of thought, and political realism. To illustrate, Hidayat Nur Wahid, a founding member and former president of Islamist-oriented Justice and Prosperous Party (PKS) revealed that Cak Nur had altered his slogan in the early 2000s.⁷ Cak Nur was rumoured to have approached the PKS to bid for the country's presidency when Hidayat was serving as the party's president. Hidayat recalled that he and the other PKS leaders were surprised by Cak Nur's move. Hidayat then shared that Cak Nur modified his slogan to be "Islam Yes, Islamic Party Yes" when explaining that he had no reason to reject PKS.⁸

Muslim career politicians and intellectuals are at odds on whether politicians and political parties can ideally promote Islamic causes: on the one hand these can refer to values, principles; and on the other, to Islamic institutions, instruments (finance and banking) or laws (shariah or hudud laws). However, the views of theologians, whose power bases are at the more grassroots levels, are rarely captured and discussed in academic writings. To begin with, there are thousands such personalities spread across Indonesia, and it would be futile to map these diverse voices. In a broad sense, their heterogeneity can be divided the following way: those living in Java versus those outside Java; local religious schools versus national leaders; and those whose authority is tied to religious institutions versus the online influencers. At the same time, they can be cogently divided into those who prefer to keep politicians and political parties at arm's length, for religious reasons, and those who prefer to be in their close company, for religious and practical reasons. The following demonstrates two schools of thought among a sample of contemporary religious elites, and their views on the role Muslims should play in party politics.

RELIGIOUS ELITES SUPPORTING ISLAMIC POLITICS

Popular and controversial preacher, Ustaz Abdul Somad, is positive about political power.⁹ He believes that political power offers a bigger impact than religious sermons, so he appreciates Islamic scholars who take up political offices. He argues that "with a signature of a city mayor, things can move forward. With my speech from the pulpit, well... Some people may in fact, fall asleep. They do not even listen. But if you lack political skills, you should participate on the voting day. Do not abstain."¹⁰

Surveys consistently show that Abdul Somad's popularity surpasses that of his counterparts.¹¹ Although not as popular in Java, he is famous in Sumatera, Kalimantan and Sulawesi. In 2019, presidential candidate Prabowo Subianto offered him to be his running mate, but he declined, feeling that he lacked the political and administrative skills. However, Abdul Somad openly encouraged Indonesians to participate in the electoral process as voters and mentioned how

voting responsibly was part of religion.¹² Some would consider Abdul Somad speaking beyond what typical religious elites should speak on—spirituality, piety, and morality—and moving into issues concerning politics and power.

NU kyai Gus Bahauddin Nursalim argues for pious politicians, and is more deliberate than Abdul Somad.¹³ Although he remains unaffiliated with any party, Gus Baha argues that supporting Islamic parties and candidates is a must. Teaching in Central Java and Yogyakarta as a master of Islamic theology, jurisprudence and Sufism, he explains that to be able to enjoin good and prevent evil (*amar ma'ruf nahi mungkar*), religion needs “strength”. He says that religion can contribute to the betterment of society if it includes a little of political party, money and knowledge,¹⁴ and concludes that Muslims should not abandon Islamic parties altogether despite their abysmal showing throughout the country’s political history. He adds that pious Muslims should not be afraid of holding public offices or being close to the political authority.¹⁵ He also states that if the traditionalist *ulama* are not close to office holders, their beliefs and sites of worship will not be shielded from the Salafi-Wahhabi (purist) criticisms. He says that “the shrines of saints, that we treat with reverence, will be regarded as centres of idolatry and polytheism.”¹⁶

There are no doubt gains to be made for being aligned to political office holders. To illustrate, the late Guru Ahmad Bakeri, the leader of Pesantren Mursyidul Amin in Kabupaten Banjar, campaigned for Shahril Darham, a candidate for the governorship. In line with patronage politics, Ahmad was appointed manager of the provincial mosque, Mesjid Sabilal Muhtadin, a socially prestigious position that gave him access to donations for his own pesantren. Since his pesantren was surrounded by paddy field, he also received a few tractors for farming. The rule of thumb seems to be that for any appearance or speech that a religious elite makes at a political rally, he will receive honorarium.

SHUNNING POLITICS

Nevertheless, some prominent ulama in Indonesia, including those living outside Java, do not need to be involved in politics or be close to politicians to assert their authority. They often avoid the limelight and power contestations altogether. This is usually the stance of *ulama* who focus their efforts on teaching and leading local religious schools. These believe that the intrusion of politics into the religious realm is dangerous. In their sermons, they prefer to speak about uniting the *ummah*, since topics on politics can be divisive. They focus on sincerity and the hereafter, in contrast to politics, which promotes worldly interests. Unlike the *ulama* from several big *pesantren* in East and Central Java who have a history of openly supporting presidential candidates, the *ulama* we discuss in the following speak up about their concerns with political manipulation.

In South Kalimantan, the late Guru Muhammad Zaini Sekumpul from Martapura represented this school of thought.¹⁷ In a viral online video, Guru Zaini said:

We do not say “[O’ Allah] You alone we worship [but] we ask for help from political parties!” No! Do you all hear me?! I am speaking loudly. We do not ask for help from political parties! Why on earth do politicians come to Sekumpul?! What do they want here?! Have they come to politicise us, or do they think we sell political support?!

[Politicians, you need to] behave properly! Do not come here and divide the ummah. We have come to be united in Sekumpul. Do not let [anyone] divide us all. The only creature that wants a divided community is Satan, the son of the Devil from the Hell of Jahannam.¹⁸

A well-known Salafi preacher, Ustaz Khalid Basalamah, also refrains from formal politics. He claims to have been invited to join an Islamic party but declined, believing that politics is “slippery”. He shares:

Ask our friends who join political parties, and ask them to say the truth, whether they often involve themselves in bribery and data falsification, all the things prohibited in Islam. I do not want to slip into that.... I think I contribute more to the ummah by teaching religion.¹⁹

To some extent, Buya Yahya Zainul Ma’arif, also shares Guru Zaini’s views. He is the leader of a boarding school in West Java, and the Islamic centre Al-Bahjah in Cirebon. Since 2015, his religious sermons have been aired via the YouTube channel Al-Bahjah TV, which has 5.32 million subscribers at the time of writing.²⁰ He prefers politicians not to visit his school during election campaigns.²¹ Although politicians bring donations when given a chance to speak before the Al-Bahjah community, Buya Yahya values political independence, because electoral-related donations would make it difficult to think objectively about the candidates.²²

However, in 2017, Buya Yahya did not refrain from commenting on political issues, and was critical of President Joko Widodo who he regarded as protecting the Christian-Chinese Jakarta governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (or Anok) when the latter was accused of blasphemy. In 2019, Buya Yahya joined a group of *ulama* to support Jokowi’s main rival, Prabowo Subianto. Although some would contend that he practised “double standards”, he was consistent about not receiving any material offers from political parties and candidates during elections.

In line with the theologians who shun politics, Habib Taufiq As-Segaff, a Ba’alawi preacher and the current chairman of Rabithah Alawiyah, has warned to “beware of *ulama* who spend much time around the rulers! They have betrayed the Prophet Muhammad. They are like pet dogs that get excited when the owner give them something [to eat or to play with]”²³ This comment, made in public sermons a few times, offended many NU kiais. Gus Yahya Staquf, current NU chairman, even felt it was necessary to retaliate publicly that:

[T]he point [made] about staying away from the *ulama* who have close relations with the government is wrong and unacceptable. The *ulama* are often needed to bridge the rulers and the people. The *ulama* also have a moral obligation to remind the rulers if they being unjust.²⁴

The theologians who shun politics never fully reject having guests from political circles and political elites at their religious schools. To maintain some distance, however, they do not give politicians the stage before their congregations to reap political capital and rally support. The theologians would normally pray for the rulers. However, they clearly understand the behaviour of some Indonesian politicians, and the potential use of money and funds to rally support. While donating to an Islamic cause such as the building of Islamic schools is an

Islamic virtue, doing so not in the name of God but for political reasons is a disvalue, and so, several of the religious elite reject such donations for that reason.

CONCLUSION

In Indonesia, whether Muslim theologians or religious elites should be involved in political party or the electoral process or not is contentious. The reality is that they do get dragged into it directly or indirectly. During the Suharto New Order government, theologians either have participated in elections (under the sanctioned party PPP), or were invited to join official institutions such as the MUI (Ulama Council of Indonesia), and ICMI (Indonesian Association of Muslim Intellectuals). After 1998, some were co-opted into the Wantimpres (Presidential Advisory Council). Any presidential or legislative assembly candidates approaching the election would endeavour to invite religious figures into the campaign teams, (termed as *tim sukses* in Indonesia), a practice that remains prevalent to this day.

While they differ in the degree of closeness Muslims should have to electoral politics, none dispute the significance of power in ushering change in society. Religious teachers provide good vote capital. Politicians who want to demonstrate their piety to the electorate can attend religious rituals, fund religious schools and mosques, and perform a publicised pilgrimage to Mecca, among others. But the best option is to canvass direct endorsements from religious elites who can mobilise their followers and students in support of their political patrons. In the coming elections, it is likely that this trend will continue, as political parties plan to boost their Islamic legitimacy and support base from boarding schools. Majority of the Muslims continue to seek guidance from the religious elites, whom they consider righteous and rational individuals and will make decisions based on Islamic principles.

The only caveat for overreliance on religious elites for votes is that the group is also a divided one. They are polarised in terms of their religious orientations: modernism (Muhammadiyah) versus traditionalism (NU); Sufism versus Salafism; and radical and violent approaches versus quietist approach. Even within NU there are fragmentations too, as support for different presidential candidates demonstrate. Theologians whose follower base is online compete among themselves for viewership. Their divergence can also be manifested in terms of their approach to politics: some are deliberate while others are indirect. As religious and identity issues resurface during the election season in 2024, religious personalities will be mobilised to take sides. Many continue to shun politics, and do not require money or power—just spirituality—to cement their authority over the masses. A number of religious elites have said that their credibility will be affected if they join political parties. However, a majority of the theologians can be persuaded to provide a religious cover for politicians and openly endorse one of the presidential candidates and the political parties.

ENDNOTES

¹ Greg Fealy, “Ulama and Politics in Indonesia: a History of Nahdlatul Ulama (1952-1967)” (PhD Monash University, 1998). Kiai Wahab was a founding figure of Nahdlatul Ulama and was its key leader during the 1950s and 1960s when it was active in politics.

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- ⁶ Muslim interests were conceptualised, according to NU at least, as material and immaterial. Patronage politics and upward social mobility enjoyed by the NU communities and cadres are material interests, while public order and safety are immaterial interests. These interests are closely tied to spiritual wellbeing, for religious obligations are easier to uphold in secure environments and with proper means and facilities. Fealy, “Ulama and Politics in Indonesia: a History of Nahdlatul Ulama (1952-1967).”
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- ⁹ “Biografi Ustadz Abdul Somad dan Pola Dakwahnya,” gamedia.com, 2021, accessed 24 Sep, 2023, <https://www.gamedia.com/best-seller/biografi-ustadz-abdul-somad/>.
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