

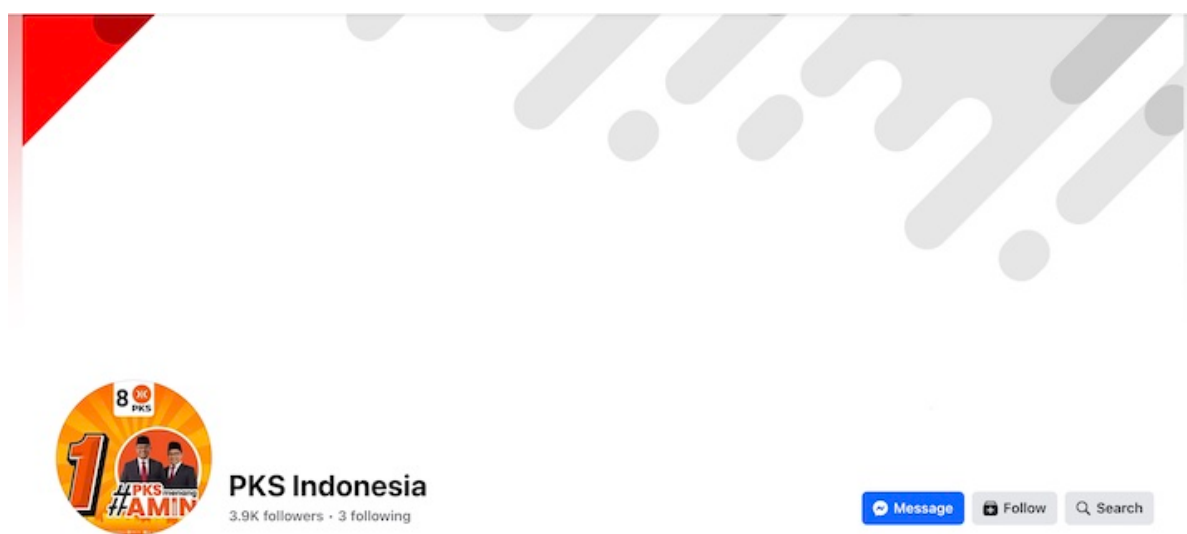
PERSPECTIVE

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Bleak Future for Islamic Parties in Indonesia after the 2024 Election

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Among Indonesian Islamic parties, the future of the Partai Keadilan Sejahtera (PKS) is the brightest, and this is due to the loyalty of its support base. PKS' Islamist ideology—inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt—is developed for a further goal, namely the founding an Islamic state in Indonesia and pushing for the Islamisation of society in Indonesia. Picture: Facebook Page of the PKS, accessed on 12 May 2024.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The recently concluded 2024 Indonesian legislative election raises questions about the future of Islamic political parties. Their last strong showing was in the 1955 election, after which they have been experiencing a slow decline. They are now on the periphery of the country's political arena.
- Only the National Awakening Party (PKB) and the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) increased their vote share in the 2024 election. Others, such as the United Development Party (PPP) and People's Party (Partai Ummat), a new Islamic party founded by reform icon Amien Rais, failed to secure any parliamentary seats.
- Islamic political parties are thinly spread. Moreover, there is no correlation between their affiliation with Islamic organisations and choice of political party. Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) members do not automatically vote for PKB; the same is true of Muhammadiyah's relationship with the National Mandate Party and Partai Ummat.
- Among Indonesian Islamic parties, PKS' future is the brightest and this is due to the loyalty of its support base. PKS' Islamist ideology—inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt—is developed for a further goal of founding an Islamic state in Indonesia and pushing for the Islamisation of Indonesian society. These ideas and beliefs foster strong political aspirations and have successfully bound members to the party.

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INTRODUCTION

In Indonesia's political history, Islamic parties, collectively, have never been a dominant force. Their best performance was in the 1955 election, the Republic's first. Back then, the total vote percentage gathered by them was 43.5 percent. Of the four parties with the highest voters, two were Islamic parties, Masyumi (7,903,886 votes) and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) (6,955,141 votes), with the other two being Partai Nasional Indonesia (PNI) (8,434,653 votes), and Partai Komunis Indonesia (PKI) (6,179,914 votes).¹

However, after 1955, Islamic parties underwent a steady decline. The trend continued during the Suharto New Order period (1966–1998). Even in the post-New Order period, after political restrictions were lifted and political space opened for all groups, Islamic parties never managed to repeat their 1955 showing.

Throughout the Reformasi era, the vote share of Islamic parties swung between 16 percent and 30 percent.² The Islamic parties' vote share from year to year are as follows: 1971 election (26.0 percent), 1999 election (36.8 percent), 2004 election (38.1 percent), and 2009 election (29.0 percent). The 2024 election recorded a similar pattern. If the National Mandate Party (PAN) is considered "Islamic" and included, then all Islamic parties gained about 30 percent. But if PAN is excluded, then Islamic parties only secured about 23 percent of the popular vote. In the past, PAN was undoubtedly categorised as an Islamic party. However, in recent years, some have questioned whether it can be considered as such, since its primary motivation is national development despite it originating from Muhammadiyah, the second largest Islamic organisation in Indonesia. A split within PAN's ranks further fuelled questions of its Islamic identity. On 29 April 2021, PAN's key founder, Amien Rais, founded the splinter Partai Ummat to move in a more conservative Islamic direction.

Considering this historical fact and current political dynamics in the country, discussing the future of Islamic parties becomes very important. This article argues that although Islamic parties showed partial improvements in the latest election, they will nevertheless remain stagnant and will not play any significant role in the future. Their prospects will not change much as long as they do not move beyond sectarian politics. Unless they can be sensitive towards rapid changes in Indonesian society, their ability to compete for political significance will remain weak.

Be that as it may, one party that deserves scrutiny is the PKS. Although it is unlikely to make any major inroads in the country's politics or increase Islamic parties' overall performance in the national polls, it enjoys much stronger loyalty from its members and supporters than its Islamic counterparts are able to do.

This article will analyse several factors contributing to the Islamic parties' abysmal performance and examine their future trajectory. It considers the following trends: Islamic parties are not the main preference for Muslims in Indonesia; although all Islamic parties strive for the upholding of Islamic teachings, their goals are fragmented; and there is a disjuncture between voters' religious ideology and political loyalty.

ISLAMIC PARTIES NOT MUSLIMS' GIVEN CHOICE

Muslims do not automatically vote for an Islamic party. Only in the 1955 election—the first ever held in the country—did Islamic parties demonstrate a strong showing; two of them were among the top four parties then. In 2024, the votes gained by Islamic parties are as follows: the National Awakening Party (PKB) gained 10.62 percent, followed by the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) at 8.42 percent, the United Development Party (PPP) at 3.87 percent and Partai Ummat at 0.42 percent. The last two—PPP and Partai Ummat—were left with no seat in parliament. Based on the Indonesian parliamentary threshold, a political party must secure a minimum of four percent of the popular vote to qualify for parliamentary seats.

Despite the large number of Muslims in Indonesia, not all voted for Islamic parties.³ To be sure, although the non-Islamic parties are mostly led by Muslims, their goals are not to pursue shariah laws or an Islamic state. In 2019, the total number of votes gained by Islamic parties was 30.0 percent, which showed a slight drop from the 2014 figure of 31.4 percent.

Taking NU supporters as a case in point, most NU members preferred to vote for non-Islamic parties. This is surprising, as NU members constitute one of Indonesia's biggest voter groups, and political parties tend to compete for their support. One could assume that a majority of NU members would vote for PKB, as it is a political party formally and ideologically affiliated with NU. A survey, however, reveals a different situation. More importantly, under Yahya Staquf's current chairmanship, NU is strongly endeavouring to return to Khittah 26, which underlines the neutrality of NU in practical politics. In addition, NU's members have been divided in their support of parties and presidential candidates.

Compared to NU, Muhammadiyah members show a different political attitude and orientation. NU leaders are bolder when expressing their political interests than Muhammadiyah members. The same situation can be said concerning political affiliation. The NU leadership is open about expressing the organisation's relationship with the PKB, and stating that the PKB is a party for NU members. Muhammadiyah, on the other hand, describes its relationship with PAN not as organisational, but as cultural. However, despite these two differing stances, both failed to secure support. Interestingly, Partai Ummat could only gain less than one percent of the popular vote, even though the founder of the party was Amien Rais, a veteran and Muhammadiyah leader.

THE QUESTION OF SOLIDITY

In addition, the solidity of Islamic parties is under serious question. Although these parties adopt different orientations—broadly distinguished as traditionalist, modernist, Islamist, progressive, and humanist—they derive legitimacy through their common promotion of Islamic values and ideals. Their political posturing differs as well, as was evident in their separate preferences for presidential candidates. For example, in order to overcome the parliamentary threshold, the PPP joined Partai Demokrasi Indonesia Perjuangan (PDI-P) in promoting Ganjar Pranowo and Mahfud MD for president and vice-president. Meanwhile, PKB and PKS endorsed Anies Baswedan and Muhaimin Iskandar as their favoured candidates. Muhaimin is incidentally a popular NU member who has a solid grassroots base in Islamic boarding schools and among traditionalist clerics (*kiai*).

The question is whether the coalition between PKB and PKS can bring political solidity to Islamic parties. Some argue that a union between PKB and PKS would reduce division among Islamic parties. This is unlikely though. The ideological differences are too deep. Even though both parties hold to the *rahmatan lil alamin* (mercy for all the world) credo, their ideological inclinations are not easily reconcilable. Their constituents are at two extreme poles: PKS members are often labelled as Wahhabi-inclined, while NU is widely known for its moderation in practising Islam. NU moderation involves the loose accommodation of local culture, something that Wahhabi-inclined ideologies vehemently reject.

Other Islamic parties such as PAN and the Crescent Star Party (PBB) chose to support the Prabowo-Gibran coalition. PBB's motto *rahmatan lil alamin* (a blessing for mankind) emphasises religious and humanitarian values and how these inspire Indonesian culture, language and attitudes towards life.⁴

FRAGMENTED VOTER LOYALTY ACROSS ISLAMIC PARTIES

During the 2024 election, Islamic parties in most instances saw increases in voter support, except for PPP.

For PKB and PKS, the increase was significant, due to various factors. In PKB's case, the increase in votes was a coattail effect of Anies Baswedan's and Muhaimin Iskandar's candidacy in the presidential election. Cucun Ahmad Syamsurijal, one of PKB's central board chairmen, is one who believes this to be the most important factor. However, other NU politicians such as Syaifullah Yusuf, disagree. Yusuf maintains that the increase was due to the struggle of PKB members at the grassroots level and to Kiai's untiring support and efforts to promote PKB.⁵ These two statements are correct to varying degrees. While both PKB and PKS, may have shared some coattail effect, PKS' increase in vote share was also closely related to its members' high level of loyalty.

A deeper analysis demonstrates that the future looks brighter for PKS compared to PKB. A survey by Denny JA from Lembaga Survey Indonesia reveals the surprising fact that PKB is not the main preference for NU members. Rather, PDI-P is, with Gerindra as second preference. This places PKB only in third place.⁶ In addition, in terms of relations between NU and PKB, the fragmentation cannot be hidden. The conflict between the late Abdurrahman Wahid, the founder of PKB, and Muhaimin Iskandar, PKB's current chairman, remains an unresolved. Yenny Wahid, Abdurrahman Wahid's daughter, even strongly stated that she would be in opposition to PKB.⁷

Furthermore, PKS enjoys a higher level of loyalty other parties in general do, and Islamic parties in particular. Loyalty can be measured by indicators such as the tendency to vote for the same party in consecutive elections, as well as the tendency to choose the presidential and vice-presidential candidate pairs supported by their party. In other words, PKS members or sympathisers consistently vote for PKS and also for the presidential candidates promoted by PKS.

On 14 February 2024 (election day), *Kompas Research and Development Institute* conducted a post-voting survey or exit poll. The survey drew 7,863 respondents from the 38 provinces and demonstrates that PKS voters are more consistently loyal, when compared to supporters of other parties: As many as 70.2 percent of respondents who voted for PKS in 2024 had also voted for PKS in the 2019 election. The level of loyalty shown for PKS is relatively consistent especially among urban and educated Muslim voters; this phenomenon was corroborated by several other surveys conducted before the election.⁸ PKS even outperformed the ruling party PDI-P.⁹ Before the election, more than 70 percent respondents from PDI-P declared their loyalty to the party, but this figure decreased significantly to 47.2 after the polls.

Nationally, PKS gained 8.42 percent of votes, making it among the six biggest parties in the country. In some provinces, PKS showed great promise, despite being a relatively small party compared to the PDI-P, Golkar, and Gerindra. It won in Jakarta, and secured the third place in West Java.

Two plausible factors explain the relatively high loyalty among PKS members and supporters. First, PKS has developed a strong presence on campuses. To many Muslim university students, especially those involved in Muslim student missionary organizations, PKS is not just a political party but a religious group that fulfils their spiritual needs. The other Islamic parties do not evoke this sentiment. Campuses serve as the party's vehicles of indoctrination, allowing it to recruit solid cadres from among them who will later support the party. This explains why PKS has a high following among urban Muslim youths; PKS is seen to be representing and striving for Islamic religious and moral values. The party is also often seen as bringing concrete solutions to diverse political and social issues. The young Muslims who voted for the PKS are also eager to play an active role as agents of change, and strengthen social justice and welfare for all Indonesians. They also feel that only PKS can govern Indonesia in line with Islamic principles.

Second, PKS's agenda is a simple one: to uphold Islamic principles. It does not make any pretensions to showcase otherwise, and this resonates with conservatives and anti-pluralist segments in society. Members understand that their support for the party equates to upholding Islamic supremacy. As Imdadun Rahmat reveals,¹⁰ for PKS, building a strong ideological foundation among its cadres is a critical goal. This strategy is similar to the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, which it drew inspiration from.¹¹

In the same vein, PKS' consistent messaging about upholding the shari'a in Indonesia shores up loyalty among its constituents.¹² Although its efforts have not succeeded so far—namely to realise comprehensive implementation of shari'a in Indonesia, or more specifically, to raise shari'a to be the national law—PKS has played a role in gaining more Islamic regulations at the local level, including the ratification of shari'a regulations in several regions. Its loyalists appreciate these efforts.

CONCLUSION

In post-2024 elections, Islamic parties will remain in the periphery. This is due to less support from Indonesian Muslims in general, and to fragmentation within the parties. Rather than work

for a shared agenda, Islamic parties are very much engaged in disparate agendas—this leaves them vulnerable to fragmentation and friction.

Among Islamic parties, only PKB and PKS have reached beyond the four-percent support requirement. Others, such as PPP and Partai Ummat failed to meet the parliamentary threshold. Both these latter two are in a complicated situation, going forward. Thirdly, although PKB and PKS gained increased votes, both showed fragmentation in voter attitudes as well. PKS voters' attitudes are more consistent compared to those of PKB's. In the long run, this modality promises a relatively solid future for PKS.

ENDNOTES

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- ¹ Herbert Feith. 1957. *The Indonesian Elections of 1955*. Cornell: Cornell University Press.
 - ² Yohan Wahyu. 2023. "Menakar Kembali Tren Elektoral Partai Politik Islam". *Kompas.id*, 12 June 2023. https://www.kompas.id/baca/riset/2023/06/12/menakar-kembali-tren-elektoral-partai-politik-islam?status=sukses_login&status_login=login&loc=hard_paywall.
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 - ¹¹ Ismail Marzuki, 2022. *Politik Hukum Islam di Indonesia*. Banyumas: Wacana Ilmu.
 - ¹² Nandang Burhanuddin. 2004. *Penegakan Syariat Islam Menurut Partai Keadilan*. Jakarta: al-Jannah.

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