

# PERSPECTIVE

RESEARCHERS AT ISEAS – YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE ANALYSE CURRENT EVENTS

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## **Ethnic Minority Politics in Jakarta's Gubernatorial Election**

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### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- Both candidates in the run-off election for the Jakarta governorship were members of economically successful ethnic minorities.
- Anies Baswedan's Arabic ancestry aided him in this election. Incumbent governor Ahok's Chinese minority status was clearly detrimental.
- The rise of identity politics challenges democratic Indonesia's efforts to manage its ethnic and religious diversity.
- Arabic ancestry may prove detrimental for political candidates in upcoming elections, particularly against *pribumi* candidates.

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## INTRODUCTION

After a heated contest for Jakarta's governorship, the KPU announced that Anies Rasyid Baswedan, an Indonesian of Hadhrami origin, had won the election. He is not the first Indonesian of Arab descent to be elected governor or appointed into high political office in Indonesia.

Fadel Muhammad, also an ethnic Arab and a leader of Al-Khairat (an old Arab organization) in Palu, is the current governor of Gorontalo. Said Assegaf is the present governor of Maluku province. During the New Order, Ali Alatas maintained a high profile in the Indonesian government, serving as a long-time Minister of Foreign Affairs. Marie Muhammad, Fuad Bawazier, Saleh Afif, Alwi Shihab, Muhammad Quraish Shihab, Said Agil Husein Al-Munawwar, Salim Segal Al-Jufri, and Nabel Makariem are also notable names and former ministers of Hadhrami descent. These individuals' political success suggests that Arab descent does not impact political participation negatively. Indeed – and as suggested by the results of Jakarta's most recent gubernatorial election – an individual's Arab roots may be leveraged as political capital during election campaigns.

While it is hardly the first time that ethnicity became salient in Indonesian politics, Jakarta's gubernatorial election serves as an important case study because both candidates were ethnic minorities in a contest where the vilification of ethnicity loomed large. While many have examined the roles played by religion and ethnicity in the Jakarta election, the issue of Arab ethnicity has not been properly studied. Most analysts have focused on Basuki Tjahaya Purnama or Ahok's Chinese ancestry, while some analysts have mentioned Anies Baswedan's ethnicity only in passing.

## ARAB DESCENT IN INDONESIA

The ancestors of most Arab people in Indonesia are from the Hadramawt province in southern Yemen. This community often identifies itself as "Hadhrami Arab" or "Hadharim." The Hadhramis in Indonesia have been successful religious, trade, and political figures, faring relatively well in business, surpassed there only by Chinese communities. At the same time, they have enjoyed religious prestige and a privileged position partly because of the connection between Islam and the Arabic world, but also because some of them are believed to be descendants of Prophet Muhammad.

Hadhramis have more easily integrated into Indonesian society compared to other foreign ethnic groups, although like the Chinese, they were categorized as "Foreign Orientals" by Dutch colonialists. Besides religion, one of the important keys in this process is intermarriage. It not only quickens the process of integration, but also gives them an economic foothold in Indonesian society.

Just like with other diasporas, there was a time when Arab Indonesians faced dilemmas regarding their national loyalty. Before 1934, there were movements that had prioritized

attachments to the Hadhrami homeland, seen in the “Shehr Declaration”<sup>1</sup>. Yemen, the country of their ancestors, was their homeland and their perceived nation. These movements, however, stimulated responses from those who no longer considered Yemen their country. The establishment of the *Persatoean Arab Indonesia* (Indonesian Arab Union) in 1934 contributed to the promotion of Indonesian nationalism among Hadramis and strengthened their integration into Indonesian society, and they regarded Hadramawt less and less as their homeland. This movement was led by *Peranakan* (locally born) Arabs with Abdul Rasyid Baswedan, the grandfather of the Jakarta governor-elect Anies Baswedan, as one of its proponents.

### CHINESE VERSUS ARAB ETHNICITY IN THE JAKARTA ELECTION

One of the flyers widely distributed during the Jakarta election featured a picture of the late Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore’s first Prime Minister, in a Malay village wearing a black *songkok* (a Malay hat) with the caption: “Lee Kuan Yew will do anything to win the vote from Malay people, including wearing *songkok* at the beginning of his career when he met the Malay community in Kampung Tani, Singapore in 1965”. The intention of this flyer was presumably to create fear among Jakarta voters and Indonesian people in general about the future sovereignty of Jakarta if they were to vote for Ahok.

Besides this flyer, other pictures, flyers, and memes of Lee Kuan Yew were widely distributed in social media in advance of the Jakarta election. These materials made two major points: First, they tried to portray Ahok in the way some Indonesians had perceived Lee Kuan Yew, i.e. as deceptive. Although ostensibly friendly with Islam and with the *pribumi*, he will eventually dispossess them of their ‘inheritance’. Second, they project the message that Singapore was once a Malay-Islamic sultanate that, through colonial and Chinese cooperation, became a place ruled and occupied by the Chinese. Thus, the election of Ahok would begin the “Chinese-ization” of Jakarta. Ahok may have worked hard as Jakarta’s governor, but, as the reasoning went, that was for the sake of Chinese people, not for native people or Muslims. As argued by Jonru Ginting – a religious conservative and self-proclaimed “social media activist” – these materials were not a subjective vilification of the Chinese, but were history and projected objective facts: “Let’s learn from Singapura. This is not SARA [race, religion, ethnicity, inter-groups relations]. This is history,” he wrote on twitter (14 April 2017) and Facebook (15 April 2017). These materials enhanced the impact of issues, such as the influx of Chinese illegal labor from Mainland China, the arrogance of Chinese towards indigenous people as seen on *Youtube*, and land reclamation plans in Jakarta that would allegedly benefit the Chinese, to frame the ethnic Chinese as a threat to the *pribumi*.

While Ahok’s Chinese-ness was easily manipulated to undermine his popularity and his chances of retaining his position as governor of Jakarta, Anies’ ethnic identity as a Hadhrami Arab also figured in the election, both positively and negatively. Growing

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<sup>1</sup> See Bajunid, O.F. 1996. “The Arabs in Southeast Asia: A Preliminary Overview”. *Hiroshima Journal of International Studies* 2: 21–38.

concerns among Indonesian Muslims, particularly within the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), focus on the threat of Arabization. *Islam Nusantara* – often defined as “a way to understand Islam contextually and to protect Islam from the process of Arabization”<sup>2</sup> – has been promoted in distinction from the image of Islam in the Middle East that has lately been closely identified with conflict, violence, discrimination against women and minorities, against cultural tradition, and with literalistic or narrow-minded religiosity. As stated by Said Aqil Siradj, NU chairman, *Islam Nusantara* is a tolerant, civilized, and peaceful Islam. “We can see the condition of Islam in the Middle East. There is never-ending civil war. Indonesian Islam is not Arab Islam. No need to wear *gamis* (Arab garb), no need to wear *sorban* (turban). No. Indonesian Islam is Islam with Indonesian characteristics,” he notes.<sup>3</sup> Siradj was indirectly referring to Indonesian Muslims, including celebrity preachers, who wear Arab garb to showcase their religiosity. Instead of wearing “traditional dress” (*pakaian adat*), he said, some celebrity preachers wear *gamis* and *sorban* daily, promote *celana ngatung* (wearing garment above the ankles), or let their beards grow long.

One of the famous personifications of Arab Islam in Indonesia is Rizieq Syihab – a founder and leader of the Islamic Defenders’ Front (FPI) – who is of Arab descent and wears Arab-style clothing. Rizieq is often identified with violence and intolerance, to the point that Ahmad Syafii Maarif, former chairman of Muhammadiyah, called him *preman berjubah* (thug with religious garb).<sup>4</sup> During the Jakarta election, Rizieq was behind the series of rallies called *Aksi Bela Islam* (Defending Islam Action) which demanded that the government fire Ahok from his position as Jakarta governor and punish him for allegedly blaspheming against Islam. Rizieq led the first rally on 14 October 2016 attended by thousands, mostly from the FPI and conservative groups. This rally was then followed by a number of other rallies, the last of which was held on 5 May 2017. The most notable were the ones on 14 November 2016 and 2 December 2016, attended by about one million people each. It was during these demonstrations that a number of anti-Chinese banners appeared.

Anies Baswedan, Ahok’s main competitor, benefitted from these rallies. He even visited Rizieq’s compound in Jakarta, seeking his endorsement. Anies, previously known as a moderate and educated Muslim, was perceived by many to be compromising his religious principles by joining a *preman berjubah* for the sake of winning the election. It was from here on that the issue of Arab ethnicity emerged in the campaign.

A focus on Anies’ ethnic minority status by Ahok’s supporters was perhaps initially intended to stop the vilification of their candidate, also a member of an ethnic minority. In contrast to Ahok’s ethnicity, however, Anies’ was seemingly unassailable, in part because his grandfather was a proponent of Indonesian nationalism and of the integration of Arab communities into Indonesia. Instead of becoming an object of vilification, then, Anies’ Arab roots became a source of public respect. Accordingly, news reports emerged that focused

<sup>2</sup> See Bizawie, Zainul Milal. *Masterpiece Islam Nusantara: Sanad dan Jejaring Ulama-Santri (1830-1945)*. Jakarta: Pustaka Compass, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Siradj, Said Aqil. “Islam Indonesia bukan Islam Arab”. *Detiknews.com*, 29 July 2015. <https://news.detik.com/wawancara/2978479/said-aqil-siradj-islam-indonesia-bukan-islam-arab>. Accessed, 14 May 2017.

<sup>4</sup> See Maarif, Ahmad Syafii. “Preman Berjubah”. *Republika*, Resonansi article, Tuesday, 9 August 2005.

on Abdurrahman Baswedan, Anies' grandfather, in January, February, and March 2017.<sup>5</sup> Most of them praised the role that Anies' grandfather played during Indonesia's struggle for Independence and his role in integrating Arab people into Indonesian society. In contrast, mass media that attacked Anies' Hadhrami identity were non-mainstream ones, including *Seward* and *Gerilya Politik*. The articles in these outlets were, for instance, entitled: "Shame on Anies Baswedan, an Arab who cannot speak Arabic"<sup>6</sup> and "Anies Baswedan and FPI have disgraced their own grandfather, a nationalist fighter".<sup>7</sup> On the whole, however, Anies' Hadhrami status and roots increased his political capital in the election.

While Anies largely avoided criticism of his Arabic roots in the election cycle, Rizieq Syihab did not. Anti-Rizieq sentiments and opposition to Arabization were reflected in a speech by Megawati Soekarnoputri, the head of PDIP (Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle), during the party's 44<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations in Jakarta on 10 January 2017. As the main supporting party for Ahok's bid in the Jakarta election, the PDIP needed to defend Ahok against the series of *Aksi Bela Islam* that were undermining his chances. In her speech Megawati stated, "If you want to be a Muslim, do not be an Arab... keep your identity as Indonesian with the richness of Nusantara culture and tradition". This speech elicited mixed responses from Muslims, with those who felt themselves targeted accusing in return that Megawati was being anti-Islam and anti-Arab.<sup>8</sup>

The peak of the retort against Rizieq Syihab on the basis of his Arab roots came during the visit of the Saudi King, Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud. Puan Maharani, Megawati, and President Jokowi warmly welcomed the King and his entourage, but during the visit, the Arab-ness of the Saudi King was often juxtaposed with the Arab-ness of Rizieq to show the contrast between the "original" Arab and some Indonesian Arabs. The King and his male family were mostly clean shaven, and they wore the traditional Arab *thawb*, with some of them even wearing European-style dress. So too, the princess did not wear a veil (*jilbab*). Crucially, Ahok was also given the opportunity to greet the King upon his arrival. Furthermore, the King went to Bali for a post-Jakarta holiday, a place vilified by many hardliners in Indonesia, who characterize it as a place of sin and polytheism. In short, the King's visit was appropriated by Jokowi to counteract his political enemies who were of Arabic descent.

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<sup>5</sup> Koran Sindo, "Anies Cucu Pejuang Kemerdekaan Abdurrahman Baswedan" (Anies is a grandson of an Indonesian fighter for independence Abdurrahman Baswedan), 13 January 2017.

<https://metro.sindonews.com/read/1170324/171/anies-cucu-pejuang-kemerdekaan-abdurrahman-baswedan-1484207049>. Accessed, 19 May 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Gerilya Politik. "Malunya Anies Baswedan, Keturunan Arab Tapi Tidak Bisa Bahasa Arab", 16 April 2017. <http://www.gerilyapolitik.com/malunya-anies-baswedan-keturunan-arab-tapi-tidak-bisa-bahasa-arab/>. Accessed 20 May 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Seward. "Anies Baswedan dan FPI Telah Menampar Kakeknya Sendiri, Seorang Pejuang Nasionalis", 20 March 2017. <https://seword.com/sosbud/anies-baswedan-dan-fpi-telah-menampar-kakeknya-sendiri-seorang-pejuang-nasionalis/>. Accessed 20 May 2017.

<sup>8</sup> CNN Indonesia. "Rizieq Shihab Tuding Megawati Menistakan Agama Islam" (Rizieq Shihab Accused Megawati of Blaspheming Islam", 16 January 2017.

<http://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20170116124714-20-186599/rizieq-shihab-tuding-megawati-menistakan-agama-islam/>. Accessed 20 May 2017.

## ETHNIC POLITICS IN FUTURE ELECTIONS

Arab ethnicity is generally respected in Indonesian society, and members of that community enjoy a certain prestige and privilege because of the closeness between Islam and the Arab world, and because some of them are considered descendants of Prophet Muhammad. In this sense, the Arab-ness of Anies Baswedan strengthened his position. The role of his grandfather in the Arab community functioned as strong political capital for his candidacy. Anti-Arab sentiments and the “fear of Arabization” in society have not limited the participation of Indonesians of Arab ancestry in politics and business.

With a rise in identity politics, Arab ethnicity may be used again in the regional elections planned for 2018 and in the 2019 national elections. In the Jakarta election, the issue of Arab ethnicity did not have any major negative impact on the candidate’s campaign. However, and as witnessed in the push-back to Rizieq, reactions to Arabization and Arab ethnicity may play out differently in future elections, where Arab Indonesian communities may be perceived as the foreigners and Arabicized Islam as an invasive sect of Islam.

Indeed, his ethnic minority status may be one reason why Anies may not be able to run for the presidency in 2019. Indonesia is very much a nation where it is widely assumed that only a Javanese can be elected president.

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