

# PERSPECTIVE

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## **The Role of Moderate Muslims in the 2017 Jakarta Election**

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### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- The strong opposition against Governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok) during the 2017 Jakarta election cast doubt on the position of Indonesia's moderate Muslims, traditionally represented by the two largest Muslim organizations in the country, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah.
- Leaders and activists associated with Muhammadiyah and NU joined the opposition against Ahok in the Jakarta election.
- While Ahok's ethno-religious background was undeniably significant, opposition against him among moderate Muslim leaders and activists was influenced by a number of factors, including Ahok's policies, communication style, political maneuvers, as well as the blasphemy case against him. The political affiliation of the Muslim leaders and activists is also an important factor behind their stance.
- There were a substantial number of Muslim leaders and politicians supporting Ahok, however, indicating that the moderates are still a force to be reckoned with even as Islamic conservatism appears to be on the rise in Indonesia.

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## INTRODUCTION

The defeat of Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok) in the recent Jakarta gubernatorial election raises questions about the political position of Indonesia's moderate Muslims. In his effort to seek a second term in office, Ahok, the ethnic Chinese Christian then-governor of Jakarta, faced massive protests from various Muslim groups, including but not limited to hardline organisations such as the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI). These committed themselves to the position that only a Muslim politician should be the governor.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, a wider segment of Indonesian Muslims joined mass rallies in late 2016 against Ahok's allegedly blasphemous statement, a case that eventually saw him sentenced to two years in prison.<sup>2</sup>

Ahok's religious and ethnic minority background, as well as his image as an alleged blasphemer, were important factors behind his defeat in the April 19 run-off election. How do we understand the position of moderate Muslims in the Jakarta election? How do they regard the Muslim conservative view that Muslims should not elect a non-Muslim leader?

## HETEROGENEITY AMONG MUHAMMADIYAH LEADERS, ACTIVISTS, AND GRASSROOTS

While the term "moderate Muslims" may refer to a complex entity, people in Indonesia usually associate it with the two largest Islamic organizations in the country: Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah. These organizations have produced countless community leaders, scholars, and politicians who have played a significant role in the country's politics. Former President Abdurrahman Wahid, politician Amien Rais, and Din Syamsuddin are just a few national leaders affiliated with these organizations. While central figures of these organizations have founded two major political parties (that is, the National Awakening Party [PKB] and National Mandate Party [PAN]) soon after Indonesia entered its *reformasi* era in 1998, the Islamic organizations themselves retained their political neutrality. Members of these organizations are also free to choose their political position.

In the case of Muhammadiyah, the diversity in political views among its leaders, activists, and followers, is inevitable because the Islamic organization itself is characterized by heterogeneity. Yet in the Jakarta gubernatorial election, despite the organization's neutrality,<sup>3</sup> a significant number of Muhammadiyah leaders and activists participated in opposition movements against Ahok. In fact, as one Muhammadiyah leader and scholar estimated, "The number of those who oppose Ahok exceeds those who support him, especially among Muhammadiyah's grassroots."<sup>4</sup> Does this mean that the majority of Muhammadiyah leaders, activists, and followers share the belief held by conservative Muslims that the Quran (more specifically verse 51 of Al-Maidah) forbids Muslims from electing a non-Muslim leader?

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.fpi.or.id/2015/12/siap-menangkan-gubernur-muslim-pengurus.html> (accessed on 17 March 2017).

<sup>2</sup> For the verdict, see <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2017/05/09/ahok-guilty-of-blasphemy-sentenced-to-two-years.html> (accessed on 7 June 2017).

<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.beritasatu.com/aktualitas/417592-muhammadiyah-tegaskan-tidak-mendukung-salah-satu-paslon-pilgub-jakarta.html> (accessed on 12 June 2017).

<sup>4</sup> Interview with a Muhammadiyah leader and scholar, Jakarta 9 February 2017.

Responses from Muhammadiyah leaders and activists towards Ahok as a Christian since he entered Jakarta politics as Joko Widodo's (Jokowi) running mate in the 2012 gubernatorial election have been varied. This shows that opposition to Ahok is not always related to the belief that Muslims should not place themselves under the rule of a non-Muslim political leader. Some of the opposition arose from miscommunication, such as that between Ahok and students affiliated with IMM (Muhammadiyah University Student Union) in early 2014, when the latter alleged that Ahok called Muhammadiyah hypocritical. But as a top Muhammadiyah leader recalled, at the beginning of Ahok's term as governor, quite a few Muslim leaders, including some of those affiliated with Muhammadiyah, were initially sympathetic to him.<sup>5</sup> They praised Ahok as a brave and clean governor. The leader also recounted how certain groups of Muslims often justified their support for Ahok by quoting a statement uttered by Ibn Taymiyyah, a medieval Muslim scholar, that reads: "Allah will support the just state even if it is led by unbelievers, but Allah will not support the oppressive state even if it is led by believers."<sup>6</sup> Similarly, in March 2015, Dahnil Anzar Simanjuntak, the president of Pemuda Muhammadiyah (Muhammadiyah Youth), praised Ahok for independence from big political parties, and supported his battle against what the public calls the "budget mafia" (*mafia anggaran*).<sup>7</sup>

Their attitude toward Ahok began to change following several allegations against him that began to emerge in late 2015. The most widespread was the allegation of corruption after the city government's purchase of a premise owned by the Sumber Waras Foundation was said to have caused potential state losses of Rp199 billion (about SGD20.6 million).<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, others claimed that Ahok neglected the interests of Jakarta's urban poor when he carried out his eviction policy. His plan to implement a land reclamation project in the Jakarta bay, conceived by the government since the Suharto era, also faced fierce resistance. This led some Muhammadiyah leaders to withdraw their support for him. In fact, some of them became outspoken critics. Amien Rais, a former Muhammadiyah chairperson, who is also a founder of PAN, is an example.

In 2006, Amien Rais gave a "democratic pin" to Ahok, who at that time was Regent of East Belitung, to symbolize his support for Ahok's drive for reform and democracy. But in April 2016, Amien Rais declared that Ahok did not deserve to be a leader because he was arrogant, stubborn, and often used swearwords.<sup>9</sup> In September 2016, Amien Rais reportedly called Ahok *Dajjal* (the Anti-Christ) and asked people to join forces to prevent him from winning

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<sup>5</sup> Interview with a top Muhammadiyah leader, Jakarta 11 April 2016.

<sup>6</sup> <http://dailyhadith.abuaminaelias.com/2012/07/07/ibn-taymiyyah-allah-establishes-a-government-of-justice-even-if-it-is-led-by-unbelievers/> (accessed on 5 April 2017).

<sup>7</sup> <http://news.detik.com/berita/2848685/pemuda-muhammadiyah-dukung-Mr.-Basuki-berantas-mafia-anggaran> (accessed on 21 March 2017). The term refers to a network of certain members of parliaments, government officials, and individuals from the private sector, who collude to win government projects.

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2016/04/13/our-facts-on-sumbar-waras-land-purchase-correct-bpk.html> (accessed on 5 April 2017).

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.merdeka.com/peristiwa/amien-rais-sebut-ahok-tak-layak-jadi-pemimpin.html> (accessed on 12 June 2017).

the bid for Jakarta's governorship.<sup>10</sup> He also warned PAN, the political party that he founded, not to give its support to Ahok.<sup>11</sup> These attacks against Ahok took place even before the controversial blasphemy allegation saga came into existence.

Dahnil Anzar Simanjuntak is another example, whose support for Ahok changed to opposition against him. He thinks that Ahok's eviction policies victimized the urban poor, and is also disappointed by the aforementioned "Sumber Waras" case, which in his view hurt Ahok's reputation as a clean politician.<sup>12</sup> His disappointment increased when blasphemy allegations against Ahok surfaced in early October 2016.

Indeed, the blasphemy case might be seen as a turning point. Since then, more figures affiliated to Muhammadiyah have declared their opposition against Ahok. In fact, Dahnil Simanjuntak, along with Pemuda Muhammadiyah (Muhammadiyah Youth), were the ones who filed a blasphemy police report against Ahok. Later, when the case was brought to court and the prosecutors only recommended a very light sentence (a one-year suspended sentence with a two-year probationary period), the secretary general of the organization, Pedri Kasman, expressed his disappointment.<sup>13</sup> When the harsher final verdict was announced, Pemuda Muhammadiyah expressed its appreciation to the court for its decision to sentence Ahok to two years in prison.

With regards to the gubernatorial election, communities affiliated with Muhammadiyah have announced their support for Ahok's competitors, although they also emphasized that their political position did not represent Muhammadiyah as an organization. In March 2017, Syahrul Hasan, a leader of Muhammadiyah's Jakarta Chapter, formed a group named "Relawan Muhammadiyah Jakarta" (Muhammadiyah Jakarta Volunteers), tasked with supporting Anies Baswedan and Sandiaga Uno's candidacy. The reason for the group's support was because Anies and Sandi paid serious attention to health, education, and justice, themes that have also been the focus of Muhammadiyah.<sup>14</sup> The support was reaffirmed by Edy Sukardi, head of Muhammadiyah's Jakarta Chapter, in April 2017.

Nevertheless, people affiliated with Muhammadiyah were not uniform in whom they supported in the Jakarta election. For example, in November 2016, Agus Pamuji Fitrianto, an activist of the Jakarta chapter of IMM (Muhammadiyah University Student Union), declared his personal support for Ahok and Djarot. In addition, Agus claimed that hundreds of Muhammadiyah cadres of his generation also supported Ahok because he had proven himself to be a public official who worked professionally.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, for Agus and

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2016/09/19/amien-rais-steps-up-attacks--on-ahok.html> (accessed on 13 June 2017).

<sup>11</sup> <http://nasional.kompas.com/read/2016/09/12/09472661/jika.pan.dukung.ahok.amien.rais.ancam.lengserkan.zulkifli.hasan> (accessed on 12 June 2017).

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Dahnil Anzar Simanjuntak, Jakarta, 10 February 2017.

<sup>13</sup> <https://news.detik.com/berita/d-3479618/pelapor-kecewa-ahok-dituntut-hukuman-2-tahun-percobaan> (accessed on 12 June 2017).

<sup>14</sup> <https://metro.sindonews.com/read/1190488/171/relawan-mu-sebut-program-anies-sandi-sesuai-fokus-muhammadiyah-1490149247> (accessed on 12 June 2017).

<sup>15</sup> <http://pilkada.metrotvnews.com/news-pilkada/DkqjJPZK-sebagian-generasi-muda-muhammadiyah-jakarta-dukung-ahok-djarot> (accessed on 12 June 2017).

those who shared his view, electing a governor is not equal to electing a leader, because a governor should play the role of a public servant instead of a leader. Roughly a week later, a group of youth calling themselves the Relawan Matahari Jakarta (Jakarta's Sun Volunteers) also announced their support for Ahok. These young people claimed to be part of the Muhammadiyah family. They argued that many of Ahok and Djarot's programmes, such as renovating mosques, have benefited Muslims.<sup>16</sup> In addition, Raja Juli Antoni, former president of the IPM (Muhammadiyah Student Union), became a spokesperson for the Ahok-Djarot campaign team.<sup>17</sup>

## OPPOSITION AND SUPPORT AMONG NAHDLATUL ULAMA MEMBERS

While some groups within the NU communities believe that a Muslim-majority region should have a Muslim leader,<sup>18</sup> virtually all who are in the central leadership of this organization consider having a non-Muslim at any level of the Indonesian government acceptable, at least hypothetically. Nonetheless, the acceptance of a non-Muslim leader cannot be interpreted as support for Ahok. Quite a few NU leaders and activists gave their political support – albeit in their personal capacities – to Agus Yudhoyono. The close relationship between former President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY) with some figures within NU is likely to have been the reason behind the support.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, PKB, which is closely related to NU, was in alliance with SBY's Partai Demokrat in supporting Agus Yudhoyono. Hence, a great number of politicians affiliated with NU were found within Yudhoyono's camp.

But there was a good number of NU people and figures in Ahok's camp as well. Nusron Wahid, former president of the NU Youth Movement (GP Ansor), Mohamad Guntur Romli, and other young NU activists became important figures in Ahok's campaign team. NU youth also became the backbone of the Relawan Nusantara (RelaNU), an organization that played an important role in the Ahok-Djarot campaign. "These RelaNU young activists worked hard in the grassroots," commented a young NU leader.<sup>20</sup> According to him, a number of leaders in the central board of NU also declared their support for Ahok in their personal capacity.

Following the elimination of Agus Yudhoyono from the gubernatorial race after the first round of the election in February, the PKB declared its support for Ahok and Djarot.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> <http://pilkada.liputan6.com/read/2651190/relawan-matahari-jakarta-deklarasikan-dukung-ahok-djarot> (accessed on 12 June 2017).

<sup>17</sup> However, it is worth noting that Raja Juli Antoni is the secretary-general of PSI (Indonesian Solidarity Party), a newly founded political party that declared its support for Ahok and Djarot.

<sup>18</sup> By way of example, a Jakarta NU leader, K.H. Ali Mahfudz, reportedly said that Muslims should support candidates with a Muslim religious background. See <https://pilkada.tempo.co/read/news/2017/02/24/348850102/kyai-nu-dki-jakarta-dukung-anies-sandi-ini-alasannya> (accessed 14 June 2017).

<sup>19</sup> Interview with a Muslim scholar affiliated with NU, Jakarta 8 February 2017.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with a young NU leader, Jakarta 7 February 2016.

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.beritasatu.com/aktualitas/424179-pkb-dki-resmi-dukung-Mr. Basukidjarot.html>, accessed on 17 April 2017.

Furthermore, while the Central Board of NU (PBNU) kept a neutral position,<sup>22</sup> its autonomous youth wing, the GP Ansor, publicly announced that it backed Ahok and Djarot,<sup>23</sup> citing its refusal to have a governor backed by radical Muslim groups as the reason. The support from Ansor, PKB and PPP (United Development Party, an Islamic party established in 1971) for the Ahok-Djarot pair shows that a significant portion of Muslim groups does not subscribe to the conservative dictum that Muslims should only vote for Muslim leaders. Nevertheless, the above Muslim groups' decision to give their support to Ahok and Djarot came too late, and it did not help them garner enough votes to win.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

During the 2017 gubernatorial election of Jakarta, the politics of Muslim leaders and activists affiliated with the two largest Islamic organizations considered to be representative of moderate Islam, was characterized by heterogeneity in views and political choices. Opposition to Ahok was considerably popular particularly among many Muhammadiyah leaders and activists, as well as among their NU counterparts. However, the opposition was not always related to the view – mostly held by conservative Muslim groups – that regards it inappropriate for Muslims to elect a non-Muslim executive leader. The fact that some well-known figures associated with Muhammadiyah were supportive of Ahok in the past, and that PAN gave its support to a Christian gubernatorial candidate in West Papua, suggests that Ahok's religious background is neither the only nor a non-negotiable reason behind their opposition. In fact, opposition against Ahok among many Muhammadiyah leaders and activists may be best understood as the result of a process influenced by a number of factors, including Ahok's policies, communication style, and political maneuvers. And finally, the religious blasphemy saga in which Ahok was entangled became a crucial factor, as it angered many in Muhammadiyah and NU.

Furthermore, it is significant that some NU and Muhammadiyah leaders or activists had given their support to Ahok. Such support indicates that a significant number in the Muslim elite remain moderate despite the recent rise of conservatism in Indonesia. However, the dynamics of the opposition to Ahok before and during the two rounds of the election should alert moderate Muslim leaders and activists that they face an increasingly tough challenge from the conservatives.

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<sup>22</sup> <http://www.cnnindonesia.com/kursipanasdki/20170314193946-516-200104/terima-kunjungan-anies-pbnu-tegaskan-sikap-netral/>, accessed on 17 April 2017.

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.tribunnews.com/metropolitan/2017/04/07/dukung-Mr.-Basuki-djarot-gp-ansor-kami-tolak-gubernur-yang-didukung-islam-radikal>, accessed on 17 April 2017.

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