

PERSPECTIVE

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A New Ideological Contestation Emerging in Indonesia?

*Max Lane**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- A long period of ideological vacuum in mainstream politics came to an end in the lead-up to the 2014 presidential elections and was further confirmed in the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial elections.
- This was initially reflected in the different stances of 2014 presidential candidates Joko Widodo and Prabowo Subianto on issues such as the direct election of the president and regional heads, and was a reflection of support or opposition to the political liberalisation that has occurred since *reformasi*.
- Since the 2014 presidential elections, opposition to political liberalisation has shifted towards the adoption of religious ideology.
- The weak defence of political liberalisation by President Widodo is manifested in his policy of making concessions to both sides within the framework of the state ideology, Pancasila.
- The outcomes at the grassroots level of Widodo's economic policies will heavily influence the evolution of this new ideological contestation.

* *Max Lane* is Senior Visiting Fellow with the Indonesia Studies Programme at ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute and Visiting Lecturer at the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Gajah Mada University.

Between 2001 and 2014, Indonesian politics was not marked by any major ideological or programmatic conflict. National politics, as reflected in electoral contestations, were primarily framed in terms of conflicts between personalities and their capabilities. Alliances and oppositional stances, even at the national level, took place in the most opportunistic way based on calculations of levels of voter support at any one time. Voter support itself was, in turn, determined by the way particular figures had been able to present themselves to the population during a preceding period – both in terms of impressions of their capabilities as well as which segment of the population, however defined at a particular moment, they might be identified with and thus, “represent”.

This situation began to change in the lead-up to the 2014 election in the national contest between Joko Widodo, nominated by the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P) and Prabowo Subianto, nominated by his own Gerindra Party and Prosperous Justice Party (PKS). The changes that began then underwent further escalation during the Jakarta gubernatorial elections in 2017.

CONTEXT: THE ABSENCE OF IDEOLOGICAL CONTESTATION

The mass movement that created the circumstances in which Suharto’s cabinet and military deserted him, thus giving him no option but to resign, was one that demanded political liberalisation. This was manifested in its demands for withdrawal of the Armed Forces from politics (i.e. from repressive activity) and the repeal of all the New Order laws that restricted representative and electoral politics. The Armed Forces did withdraw from political repression oriented politics (except in Papua) and the repressive electoral laws were repealed or annulled, resulting in new, much freer elections (although communist parties were still banned) as well as an end to state authoritarian labour unionism.

There was no real resistance from anywhere in the political elite to these changes. Almost all the new political parties were derivatives of political parties that existed under the New Order or established by well-resourced figures or networks that had grown under the New Order.

This state of politics, characterised by opportunistic electoral contestation facilitated by ideological homogeneity only slightly fractured by different cultural vocabularies, lasted from 2001 until 2013. There appeared to be an emerging challenge to this in 2011-2012 when there was a very visible rise in labour activism and discussion in increasingly active trade unions of the need for a labour party. However, by 2013, following the Declaration of Industrial Harmony, this dynamic had been co-opted.

It was also in 2013 that the first signs of a new ideological contestation emerged.

THE WIDODO PHENOMENON

The fact that Joko Widodo, a furniture exporter from a middle-level city, could achieve sufficient popularity to have a relatively easy ride to the Presidency points to some changes in the ideological sphere. The Widodo candidacy in 2014 was the first presidential campaign where a competition emerged pitting *perceived welfare policy success* against a *rhetorical ideological stance*. Widodo's image was that of a successful mayor who had introduced universal health insurance in Solo and who had established cooperative relations with the *kampung* (village) poor in that city.¹ His rival, Prabowo Subianto, had neither held any position in civilian government nor had any record of advocacy around welfare policies. He campaigned using nationalist, anti-foreign rhetoric.²

The face-off between policy reputation and nationalist rhetoric altered the ideological atmosphere. This more serious technocratic element was strongly supported by significant sections of the formally educated urban middle class, especially those with some kind of pro-welfare or pro-social liberalisation activist history.³ Some of these elements became important advocates for the Widodo candidacy, often integrating their own socially and politically liberal agenda into that advocacy. Some even formally adopted slogans associated with Sukarnoist ideas in their campaigning for Widodo⁴ – probably a reflection of wishful thinking.

It should be emphasised, however, that Widodo himself never emphasised in his campaign the socially or politically liberal ideas that many of these supporters advocated. His own emphasis, however, was on supporting the private sector as the motor of social progress, through an accelerated infrastructure programme and bureaucratic deregulation.⁵

One high-profile element of the political liberalism of some of his supporters, which he also had to concede to, was the call for “reconciliation” or dialogue and open discussion to what is referred to as the “1965 tragedy”, i.e. the events around the end of the Sukarno government in 1965-6 and the mass killings and detentions that followed.⁶ This was often formulated as a commitment to “resolve past serious violations of human rights”. This particular issue has become a point of contention for those opposed to political liberalisation.

¹ <http://www.newmandala.org/the-local-merit-president/>.

² See Vedi Hadiz and Richard Robison, “Competing populisms in post-authoritarian Indonesia” in *International Political Science Review*, September 7, 2017.

³ This layer were strongly represented in the Seknas Jokowi.

⁴ The Seknas Jokowi had a publication during the campaign called Trisakti, a slogan from the Sukarno period. See also “Seknas Jokowi Buat ‘Plan’ Ekonomi Berbasis Trisakti untuk Jokowi”, *Kompas.com* - 25/04/2014.

⁵ See for example the nationally televised presentation by Widodo of his policies to the Indonesian Chamber of Commerce. This can be accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5nDQTRTon3g>.

Anti-Political Liberalisation in an Ideological “Vacuum”: The Role of Religion.

Meanwhile, those opposed to the extent of liberalisation underway and any further deepening of it had needed to find a justifiable ideological position. The Widodo–Subianto electoral contestation in 2014 was symbolically manifested in opposing positions on whether there should be a retreat from direct election of the President and other executive state positions. Subianto advocated a return to the earlier system where the People’s Consultative Assembly (MPR) elect the President and local parliaments select local executives while Widodo supported the current system of direct election. Subianto used the argument that the earlier system was more in-tune with “Indonesian traditions”.⁷ However, since the 2014 legislative and presidential elections, Subianto and his party have retreated from that position and accepted the continuance of direct elections. This retreat reflected the lack of strong support for Subianto’s position and of ideological justification for it. It also reflected the underlying weakness of any explicit call for a return to Suharto era politics. While such sentiments exist, it has not been strong enough to be the motor force of active campaign mobilisations.

Since 2014, opposition to political liberalisation has manifested itself in the higher profile and increased use of conservative political Islam.⁸ An alliance has been formed between Subianto’s Gerindra party and the Islamist party PKS and, in the campaign context, with conservative and militant Islamic organisations such as the Islamic Defenders’ Front (*Front Pembela Islam*, FPI) and Hizbut Tahir Indonesia (HTI). These particular Islamic organisations are also deeply hostile not only to political liberalisation, but also social liberalisation. They are hostile to any relaxation of taboos regarding the PKI and 1965, and also of liberalisation of social mores, such as regards the place of women and sexuality issues. They are strongly supportive of religious authority, as expressed in the right of religious scholars (of their choosing) to interpret religious teaching and laws and to ensure their implementation in society and politics. HTI spokespeople, for example, have publicly expressed their opposition to democracy and any perspective that argues that sovereignty should be in the hands of the people and their representatives. They argue that sovereignty, in the sense of ordering society, is in God’s hands and thus could only be interpreted by experts in religion.⁹

Gerindra and PKS were closely associated with campaigns organised by these organisations against former Jakarta governor, now prisoner, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok), on the grounds that he had “insulted Islam,” including the very large mass mobilisations on the

⁷ Edward Aspinall and Marcus Mietzner, “Don’t be fooled – Prabowo (still) wants to get rid of direct presidential elections,” in *New Mandala*.

⁸ It should be noted that the rise of this form of religious conservatism is also associated with the increased racialist anti-Chinese agitation. See Leo Suryadinata, “General Gatot and the Re-emergence of Pribumi-ism in Indonesia”, *ISEAS Perspective*, 7 July 2017.

⁹ See “Berita Terbaru, Alasan HTI Tolak Sistem Demokrasi Pemerintah Kini”, <https://nasional.tempo.co/read/news/2017/05/09/078873841/berita-terbaru-alasan-hti-tolak-sistem-demokrasi-pemerintah-kini>.

theme of “Defend Islam”.¹⁰ Major speeches at this event also included attacks on “too much liberalisation.”

The emerging role of conservative Islamic groups as key ideologues of anti-liberalisation, and their alliance, with parties such as Gerindra, reflects the lack of any other existing and credible pro-authoritarian ideologies to draw upon. The whole ideological dynamic of what was called *reformasi* was and is anti-authoritarian and pro-democratic reform. This *reformasi* sentiment, however vaguely it was formulated in the minds of Indonesia’s citizens, was widespread.

In this context, conservative, authoritarian religious ideology and its ideologues gain a role as the opponents of anti-liberalisation and allies of other opponents of political liberalisation. This tendency has also elicited an opposition, at various levels of intensity, from numerous leading figures from more moderate Islamic organisations such as Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama, to a return either to Suharto-style authoritarianism or religious authoritarianism.

The Political Economy of Anti-liberalisation Politics

The question arises as to whether this emerging ideological contestation is associated with any processes developing in the political economy. Hadiz has recently argued that conservative Islam is being utilised by “oligarchies”.¹¹ The counter-position between Widodo and Subianto does represent a factional division within Indonesia’s capitalist class, most clearly that on one side between ex-crony capitalists who were closest to the Suharto ruling clique, and on the other side a mixture of those who were less close and the large ocean of *kabupaten* (district) level entrepreneurs and bureaucrats, of whom Widodo is himself one. The political needs of these two factions are different. The former hankers for the centralised authoritarianism of the Suharto era, where those close to the centre are in an enhanced position. It is not surprising therefore to see overt close political relations between the Suharto family politicians, and other ex-crony figures and Subianto as well as the new breed of religious authoritarians.

The second factional grouping needs a more deregulated environment where big capital’s dominant position is not further enhanced by excessive possession of political connections. Their inclination for less centralised state power, which does as a result have aspects of being more “democratic”, also puts them in an alliance with the formally educated urban middle class for whom any regime of meritocracy also requires more democracy, in the sense of less power for crony cliques.

¹⁰ See <http://www.opinibangsa.id/2017/07/merinding-pidato-ultimatum-habib-rizieq.html> for Rizieq’s speech. See <http://wartakota.tribunnews.com/2016/12/03/sikap-aksi-212-prabowo-subianto-elite-di-indonesia-meninggalkan-rakyat> for Prabowo’s assessment on the action.

¹¹ See Vedi Hadiz, “Oligarki Kendalikan Konservatisme Islam di Indonesia” a report in Tempo.co, <https://m.tempo.co/read/news/2017/09/16/078909736/vedi-hadiz-oligarki-kendalikan-konservatisme-islam-di-indonesia> The use of the term “oligarchy” has become very widespread and seems mainly to refer to business groups around major wealthy conglomerate owners.

Where to Next?

How this emerging ideological contestation will evolve is still not clear – although it seems certain it will not go away. Among the many variables that will affect future developments, two stand out as the most important. The first is the inherently restricted appeal of conservative, religious authoritarianism. Political parties campaigning under the banner of Islam have never received more than 30-35% of votes in elections, from 1955 until today.¹² Even within that constituency, there are major divisions among key figures of major organisations, such as Muhammadiyah and Nahdatul Ulama, opposing the authoritarian perspective. Given this fact, it may still be necessary for anti-liberalisation political forces to find additional attractive ideological justifications.

The second is whether the perspective associated with the Widodo presidency can gain greater momentum. Widodo only narrowly won the 2014 elections and the candidate he supported in the recent Jakarta gubernatorial election lost to a candidate supported by the Gerindra-PKS-conservative Islamist alliance. Furthermore, Widodo's own commitment to social and political liberalisation has not manifested in a strong defence of liberalisation. In fact, Widodo's response to criticisms of liberalisation has been to make concessions to its critics. Most recently, he stated several times that he too would “clobber the PKI” or “kick them”¹³ if they re-appear, legitimising the campaigning that there is such a danger of a return of the PKI. On the other hand, after police harassment of dissident activism had become pronounced in 2015, it has not intensified or become systematic.

Rather than a defence of political liberalisation (i.e. further democratisation), Widodo and his supporters are responding to the increased activity of religious authoritarianism by advocating a defence of Pancasila and “pluralism” as an implicit rejection of an Islamic state or a state with enhanced religious authority. The President has established a special office to promote Pancasila. The government has also unilaterally banned the HTI as an anti-Pancasila organisation. The latter decision, being a unilateral ban on an organisation because of its ideology, has been criticised by civil liberties NGOs and pro-democracy activists and intellectuals.¹⁴

Widodo's strategy seems to be to make aggressive statements against the PKI on the one hand and ban the most ideologically hard-line Islamist organisations on the other hand, in a “balanced” defence of Pancasila. This stance has also received support from moderate Islamic leaders.¹⁵

¹² The success of the Anies Baswedan in the Jakarta Gubernatorial elections this year could perhaps be cited as the first example of a victory by a “non-secular” electoral campaign in an electorate usually giving secular majorities.

¹³ <http://nasional.kompas.com/read/2017/05/17/16433321/jokowi.kalau.pki.nongol.gebuk.saja>

¹⁴ See Ahmad Najib Burhani, “The Banning of Hizbut Tahrir and the Consolidation of Democracy in Indonesia”, in *ISEAS Perspectives*, Singapore | 19 September 2017.

¹⁵ See, for example, Johannes Herlijanto, “The Role of Moderate Muslims in the 2017 Jakarta Election”, in *ISEAS Perspectives*, 13 July 2017.

This lack of a strong public statement defending either political or social liberalisation from the President himself, or any of the political parties supporting the President, means that such an ideologically abstract defence remains limited to civil rights NGOs, intellectuals and activists.

Underpinning Widodo’s strategy appears to be the belief that he can legitimise his Presidency and strengthen his popularity through success in the economic sphere. As Warburton has argued, his sole serious priority appears to be facilitating activity by the private sector by accelerating the country’s infrastructure programme (mostly planned under Yudhoyono’s presidency) and reducing “red-tape” faced by the private sector.¹⁶

How the emerging ideological contestation evolves will, therefore, also depend on how successful Widodo’s private-sector economic strategy will be in delivering improvements to people at the grassroots. Wilson has already convincingly argued that in some parts of Jakarta, conservative religious authoritarian groups have made headway in poor kampungs because of a perceived failure by Widodo (and Ahok) in this area.¹⁷

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¹⁶ Eve Warburton, “Indonesian Politics in 2016 Jokowi and the New Developmentalism” in *Bulletin of Indonesian Economic Studies*, Volume 52, 2016 - Issue 3.

¹⁷ Ian Wilson, “Jakarta: inequality and the poverty of elite pluralism”, in *New Mandala*, 19 April, 2017. See <http://www.newmandala.org/jakarta-inequality-poverty-elite-pluralism/>.