

PERSPECTIVE

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Indonesia's Political Parties and Minorities

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Indonesian political parties are often portrayed as being more or less the same in terms of ideology and policy platform. The only general distinction is between secularist and Islamic parties. This argument, however, has yet to be thoroughly tested.
- A new survey of members of the Indonesian political elite explores whether that religious cleavage drives variation in how Indonesian politicians think about social tolerance and pluralism.
- We find that party membership is a strong indicator of a politician's views on pluralism, and attitudes toward religious, ethnic and political minorities.
- Members of secularist parties are substantially more likely to endorse pluralistic ideas and express tolerance toward minorities, while members of Islamic parties are less comfortable with minorities playing a prominent role in Indonesian politics and society.
- These findings suggest that the cleavage between secularism and political Islam is an important driver of political competition in Indonesia and that political party preferences are more differentiated than often assumed.

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INTRODUCTION

Indonesia's political parties are often described as being more or less the same. When it comes to matters of social welfare, or economic and fiscal policy, there is little that separates them ideologically or programmatically. The only discernible cleavage between Indonesia's major parties is assumed to be religious: some seek a larger role for Islam in public affairs, and others promote a more secular vision of Indonesia's politics and government. In general, analysts do not see this cleavage as having substantial implications for policy-making in Indonesia.

These conclusions, however, are yet to be thoroughly tested. Scholars have based their analysis primarily on the rhetoric and coalitional strategies of the major parties.¹ While these are viable indicators of party ideology, a more systematic approach is to ask politicians where they stand on a range of policy issues and topics of social and political import, and to compare their answers across parties. The logic here is that, if parties are undifferentiated in their ideological and policy platforms, their members must also vary little in terms of their social and political preferences.

In the comparative literature on political representation and ideological polarisation, mostly based on North American, European and Latin American cases, elite surveys have proven to be a fruitful way to study party ideology and competition.² However, no such studies have been undertaken of Indonesia's political elite - until now.

A new survey conducted by the Indonesia Survey Institute (LSI), in collaboration with the Australian National University, provides an unprecedented opportunity to investigate systematically various assumptions about ideational differences within Indonesia's political party spectrum. The survey sampled 508 members of Indonesia's provincial legislative councils (DPRD) from 31 of Indonesia's 34 provinces, and it was designed to be representative of the entire national population of provincial parliamentarians.³

In a previous article,⁴ we examined how legislators viewed the ideological position of their own parties on a range of scales, and the results did indeed reflect a recurring view in the literature: Indonesian political parties differ sharply in their views on the role of Islam in public and political life. At one end of the ideological spectrum, the Indonesian Democratic Party Struggle (PDI-P) is the most secularist party. At the opposite end, the United Development Party (PPP), Prosperous Justice Party (PKS), National Mandate Party (PAN) and National Awakening Party (PKB) rank as the most supportive of a larger role for Islam in politics.

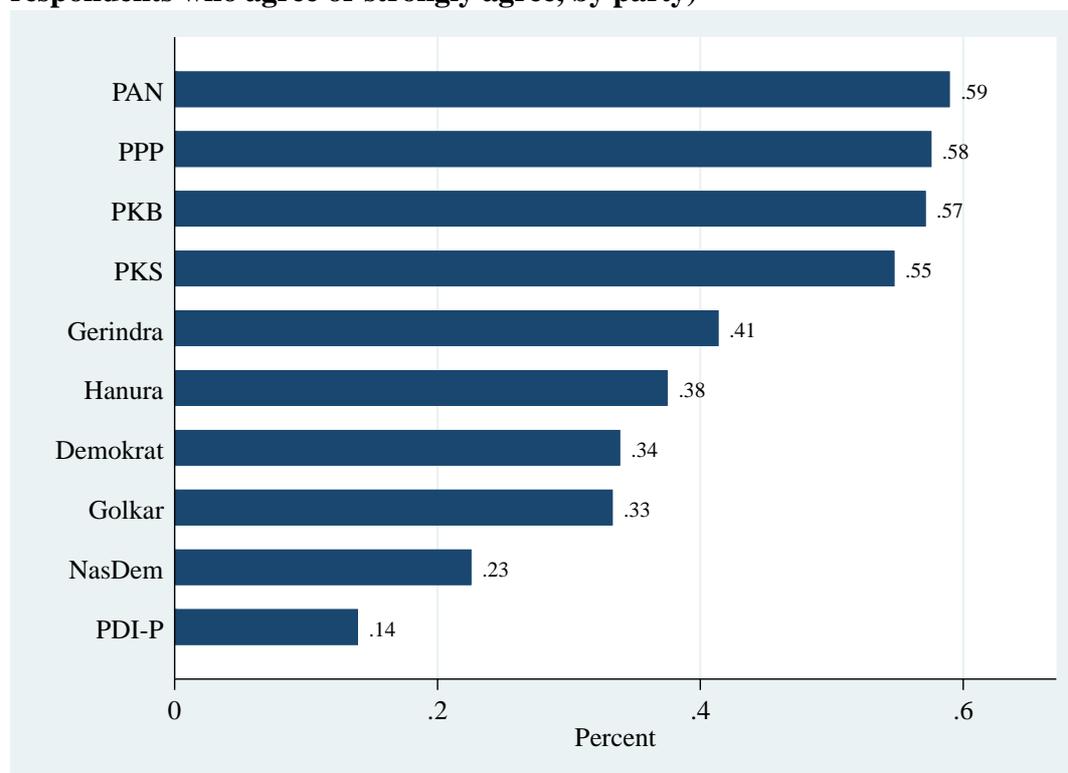
In this paper, we explore whether that religious cleavage drives variation in terms of how Indonesian politicians think about social pluralism and tolerance toward religious, ethnic and political minorities. We first examine elite views on the role of Islam in politics, and then explore how this main ideological dimension is associated with elite attitudes in three main areas: the position of ethnic and religious minorities, the nature of economic inequality in contemporary Indonesia and perceived threats from communism.

These are sensitive and politically important issues in the context of recent trends in Indonesia. According to international observers, Indonesia’s democracy has experienced a series of setbacks, primarily due to a deterioration in the protection of civil liberties and minority rights.⁵ Politics in Indonesia has also taken a more populist and nativist turn in recent years, and the political clout of more intolerant brands of Islam has been growing. Since the 2014 presidential elections, President Widodo’s detractors have continued to mobilise an exclusivist nationalist rhetoric, coloured by anti-Chinese and anti-communist sentiment. Our analysis can provide a sense, not just of political party differences, but of how far such ideas resonate with Indonesia’s political elite.

THE KEY IDEOLOGICAL DIVIDE: SECULARISM VS. POLITICAL ISLAM

We begin by looking at questions about the role of Islam within the state. On this matter, we expect to see a clear divide between party elites in Islamic parties, and those of elites in non-Islamic parties. We asked legislators whether the government should prioritize Islam over other religions. Overall, 38% agreed or strongly agreed. Figure 1 shows the breakdown by party affiliation.

Figure 1. The government should prioritize Islam over other religions (share of respondents who agree or strongly agree, by party)

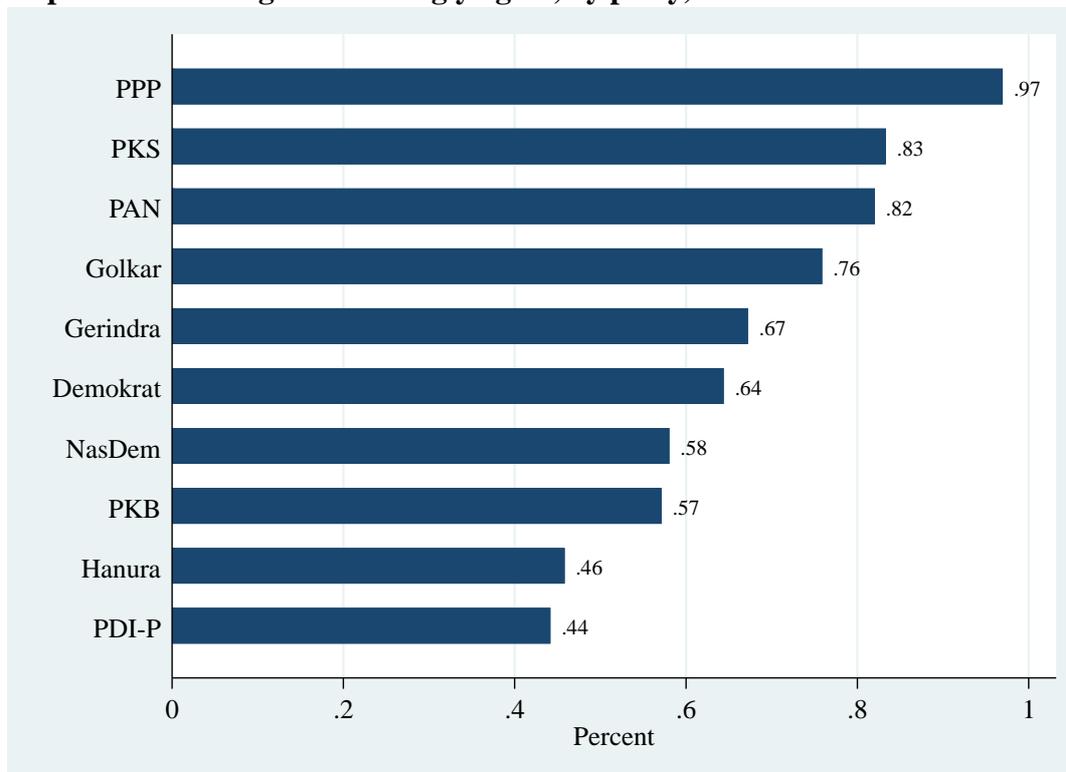


As expected, elites from Islamic parties were more inclined to agree. For PAN, PPP, PKB and PKS, a majority of respondents felt the government should prioritise Islam. It is noteworthy that Gerindra’s legislators were the next most likely to agree or strongly agree with this

statement. Since 2014, Gerindra has sustained a close relationship with PKS and, to a lesser extent, PAN. These parties constitute the core “opposition coalition” that backed Prabowo Subianto’s campaign against President Widodo in 2014, and they continue to oppose his administration. The results indicate that, while ostensibly secularist, Gerindra’s members exhibit similar preferences to those in the conservative Islamic parties with which their party has formed a coalition. Overall, the parties are placed in an order that confirms expectations, with the Islamic parties at the top, the secular parties in the middle, and PDI-P at the end.

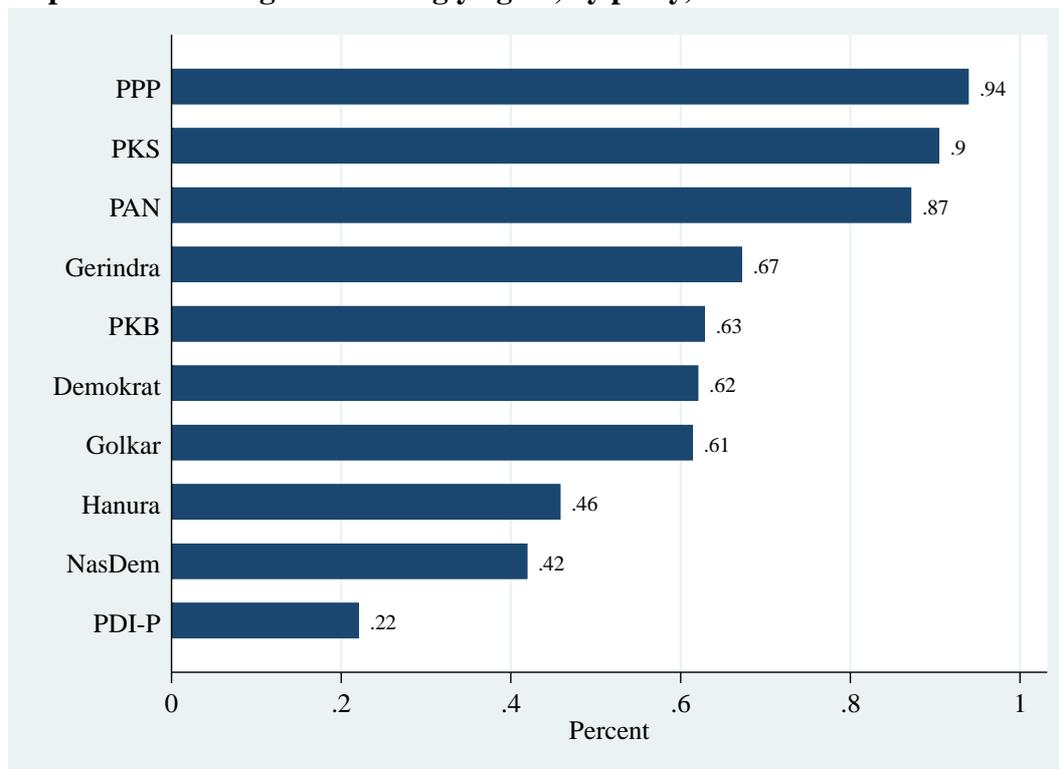
Indonesia has been the focus of much recent international criticism for its criminalisation of blasphemy, particularly following the trial and imprisonment of Jakarta’s former governor, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok), for comments he made during the 2017 gubernatorial election campaign. We asked legislators whether blasphemy against Islam should be punished more severely, and a striking majority of 67% agreed or strongly agreed. Unsurprisingly, the conservative Islamic parties, PPP, PKS and PAN were the most unified in their support for harsher punishment. Even amongst the secular parties, however, we found many were in agreement: 76% of Golkar, 67% of Gerindra and 64% of Demokrat legislators were all in favour of instituting further penalties. Once again, PDI-P appears at the end of the list, with a minority of its legislators supporting more severe punishment for blasphemers.

Figure 2. Blasphemy against Islam should be punished more severely (share of respondents who agree or strongly agree, by party)



Finally, we asked legislators whether it is important to vote for a Muslim leader at elections. Overall, 60% agreed or strongly agreed, with the breakdown over political parties once again reflecting the cleavages between secularist and Islamic parties, as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3. When voting in elections, it is important to vote for a Muslim leader (share of respondents who agree or strongly agree, by party)



VIEWS OF THE INDONESIAN CHINESE

Next, we explore whether the religious cleavage informs how politicians understand other social, cultural and political problems, starting with an analysis of how politicians view Indonesia’s minority ethnic Chinese community. While no longer subjected to the type of institutionalised discrimination that existed under the New Order, prejudice against the Chinese minority continues to characterize Indonesian society and politics.⁶ Indonesia analysts have observed an upswing in sectarian politics in recent years, some of which targets the ethnic Chinese community. To what extent are politicians differentiated along party lines in their views towards this particular minority community?

We asked legislators whether they thought Chinese Indonesians have too much influence in Indonesian politics. In total, 46% agreed or strongly agreed. We also asked whether politicians felt comfortable with a Chinese Indonesian holding high political office, and 45% said they did.

Figure 4. Chinese Indonesians have too much influence in Indonesian politics (share of respondents who agree or strongly agree, by party)

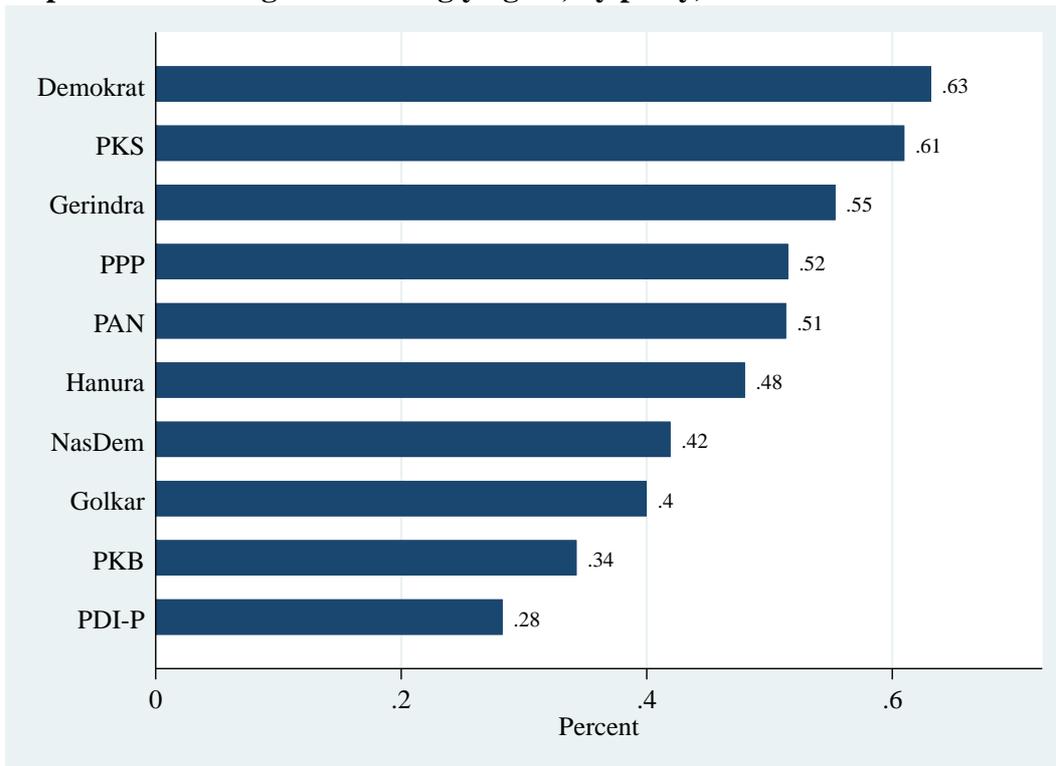
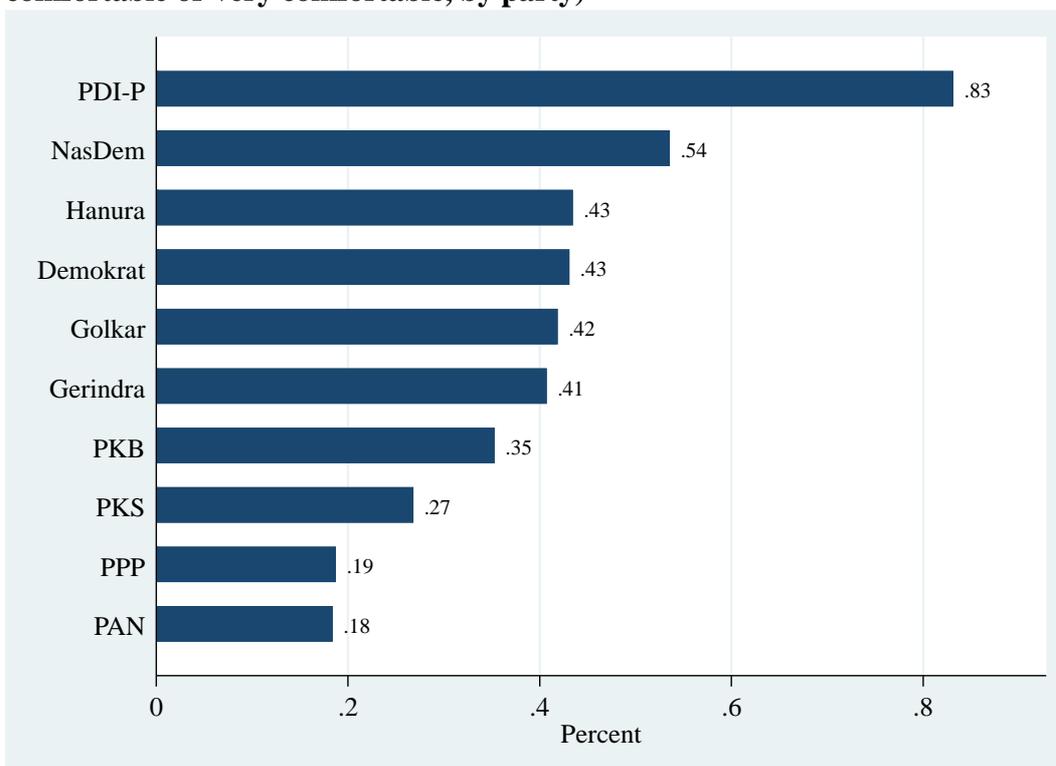


Figure 5. Are you comfortable with Chinese Indonesians becoming public leaders (like regents, mayors, governors, or ministers)? (share of respondents who are quite comfortable or very comfortable, by party)

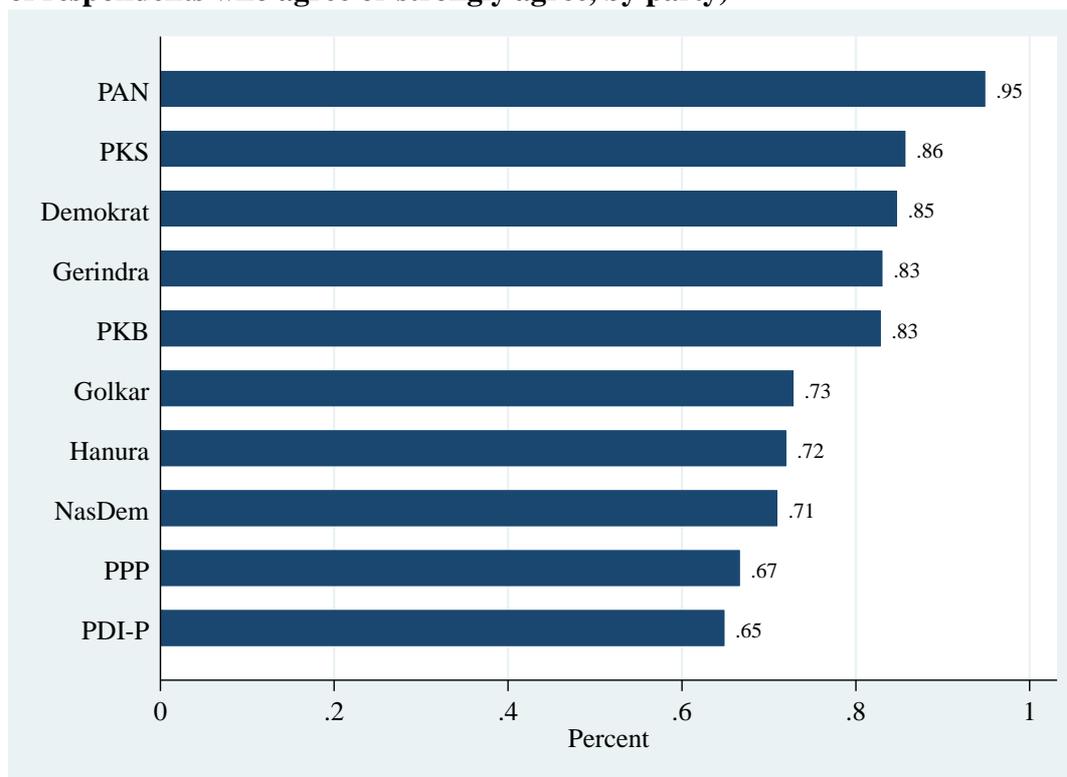


The parties are ordered in almost precisely the same way as they were on questions of Islam and the state. A majority of legislators from the Islamic parties, together with a majority from Gerindra and Demokrat, felt that Chinese Indonesians had too much influence in the political sphere. Again, PDI-P legislators emerged as the most pluralist, and expressed the least concern about Chinese Indonesians' engagement in political life.

The question on Indonesian Chinese leadership was far more polarising. Overall, a majority (55%) of Indonesian politicians were uncomfortable with the idea of Chinese Indonesians holding positions of political power. However, politicians from Islamic parties were far more likely to express such sentiments. Specifically, less than 20% of PAN and PPP legislators were comfortable with Chinese Indonesians in positions of political power, while the figure among PDI-P legislators is substantially higher at 83%.

The results were less polarised when we asked provincial politicians whether Chinese Indonesians have too much influence in the Indonesian economy. Overall, a striking majority of 77% agreed or strongly agreed. The party breakdown is displayed in Figure 6. A sizable majority of PAN, PKS, Demokrat, Gerindra, PKB, and even PDI-P legislators agreed. This number is notably higher than in the general population. An ISEAS public opinion survey asked the same question in 2017 and found 62% of Indonesians agreed.⁷ Both numbers are high and reflect a common perception of Chinese economic privilege in Indonesia. But legislators appear more sensitive to the issue. It may be that politicians are more engaged in, or exposed to, the world of big business, and thus have particularly strong views on the role of Indonesian Chinese businesses within the economy.

Figure 6. Chinese Indonesians have too much influence in the Indonesian economy (share of respondents who agree or strongly agree, by party)

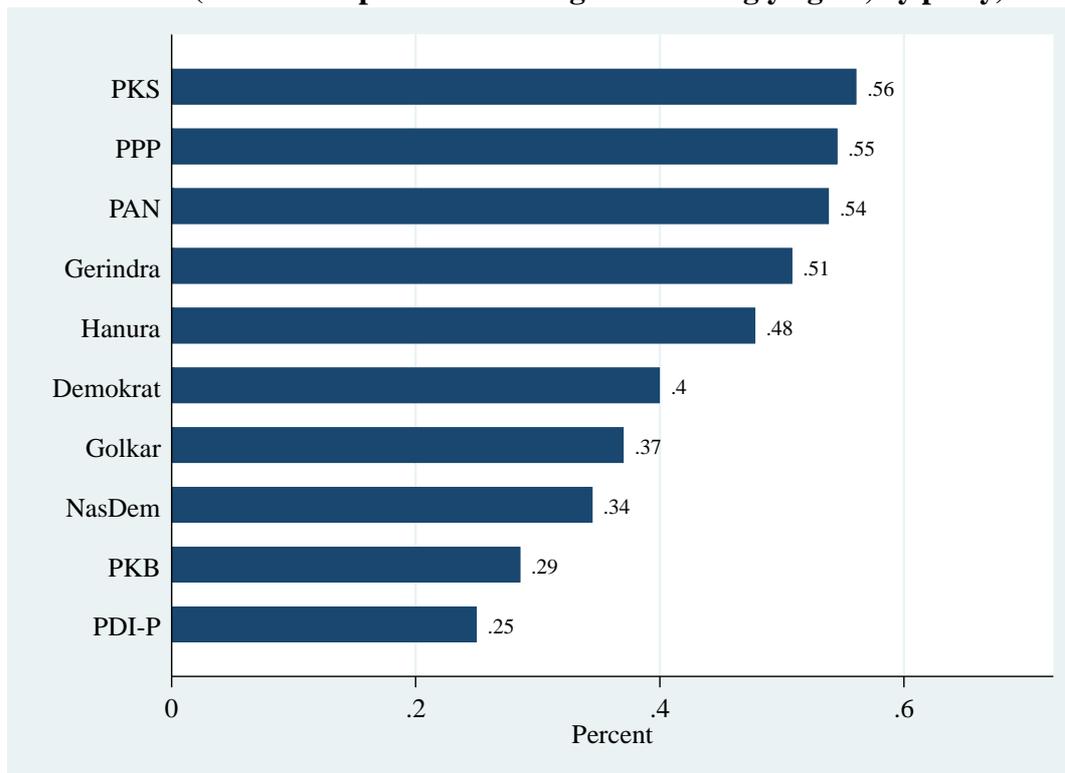


Overall, we can see that the Islamic and non-Islamic party divide plays out here as well, which is not unexpected. Chinese identity is often conflated with being Christian or Buddhist, and hence the religious cleavage in Indonesia’s party system also predicts the extent to which politicians express anxiety about, and prejudice toward, the Indonesian Chinese minority.

IS INEQUALITY AN ETHNO-RELIGIOUS ISSUE?

We also examined how politicians perceive economic inequality. Indonesia has, over the past decade, become one of the most unequal countries in the world, and inequality has become increasingly politicised.⁸ Fringe Islamist groups as well as mainstream Islamic leaders and politicians speak of the economic plight of the *ummah*, and imply that inequality in Indonesia has a religious dimension.⁹ So, we asked legislators whether they felt Muslims were economically worse off than non-Muslim in Indonesia. Overall, 41% agreed or strongly agreed. Figure 7 breaks this down by party.

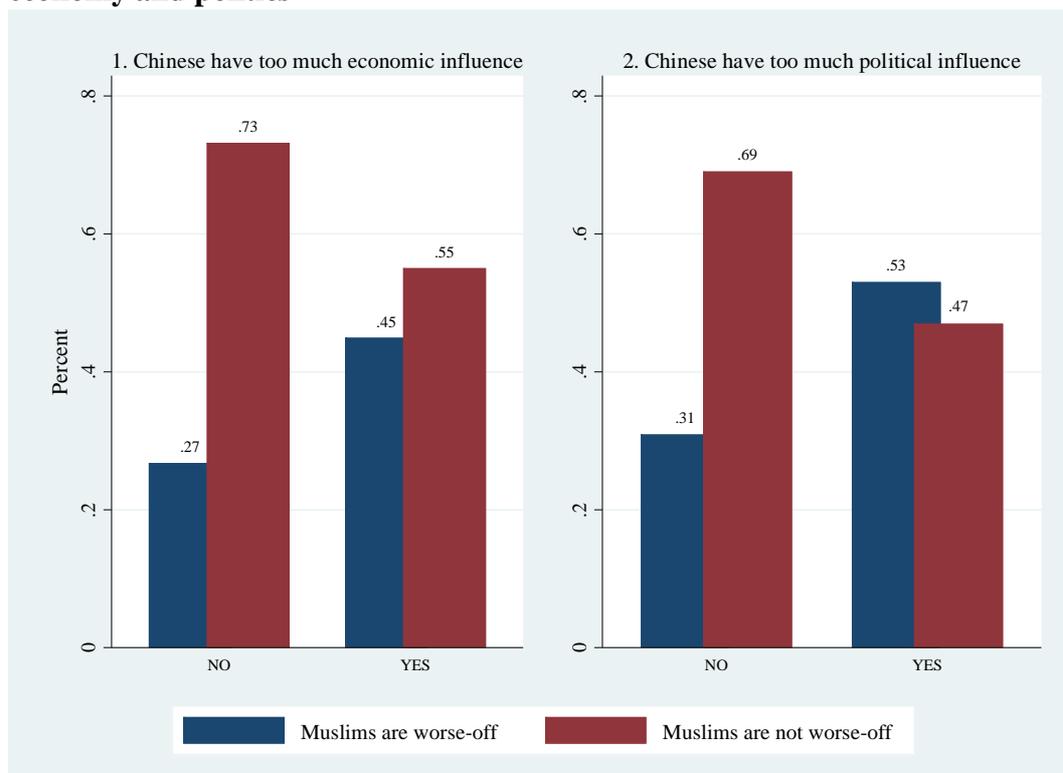
Figure 7. In Indonesia, the economic level of Muslims is worse than the economic level of non-Muslims (share of respondents who agree or strongly agree, by party)



A majority of legislators from PKS, PPP, PAN and Gerindra agreed. Since President Widodo took office, it has primarily been national-level elites from these Islamic parties and Gerindra that deploy narratives about Muslim economic grievance, and criticise the Jokowi government for neglecting the *ummah*. The legislators that were least convinced by the idea of Muslim deprivation are the parties in government – PDI-P, NasDem, Golkar and the other Islamic party, PKB.

Figure 8 explores the correlation between this question and the questions on the economic and political position of the Chinese Indonesians reviewed above. As the figure shows, perceptions of inequality are strongly correlated with anxieties about Chinese political and economic influence. For instance (right panel in the figure), among respondents who do not believe that Chinese Indonesians have too much influence in politics, only 31% feel Muslims are economically worse off. However, among politicians who worry about the increasing influence of Chinese Indonesians in political life, a majority (53%) agree that Muslims are financially disadvantaged.

Figure 8. Perceptions of inter-group inequality and Chinese-Indonesian influence on the economy and politics

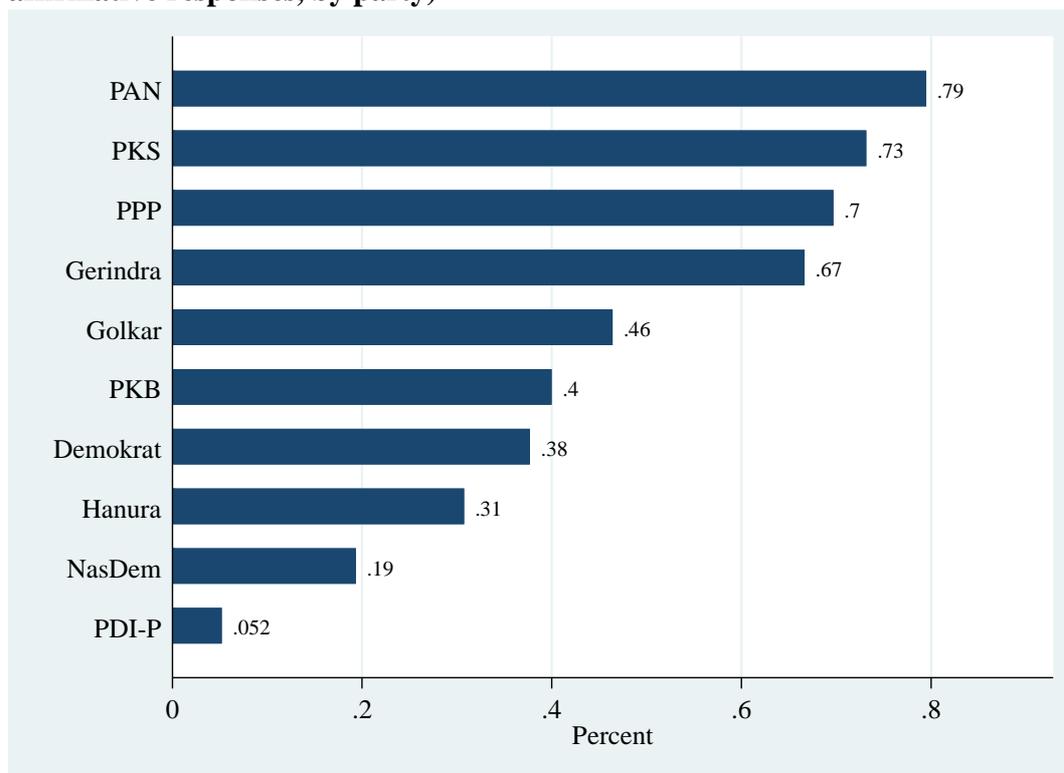


WHO'S AFRAID OF THE COMMUNISTS?

Finally, we explore whether politicians' concerns over the re-emergence of the banned Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) might be informed by their party allegiance. Overall, 43% of provincial legislators believed the PKI is undergoing a revival, while 57% disagreed. Of those who agreed, almost all (95%) felt the PKI constituted a threat to the country.

Figure 9 displays the party breakdown, and it shows sharp differences across party lines. While a majority of legislators from Gerindra, PAN, PKS and PPP, believed the PKI is in the midst of a revival, respondents from the secular parties and PKB expressed far less concern. Once again, the chart in Figure 9 overlaps strongly with the secularist-Islamic divide. It is worth considering whether these results may also follow from partisan competition independent of religious ideology. Much of the fearmongering about the PKI has been propagated by President Widodo's political enemies who, since the 2014 elections, have accused him of having historical ties to the PKI as a strategy to undermine his popularity.¹⁰ Indeed, almost all politicians from PDI-P, the party to which President Widodo belongs, rejected the idea that the PKI was on the rise.

Figure 9. Do you think that the PKI is trying to return and have a revival? (Share of affirmative responses, by party)



CONCLUSION

Our survey results reveal that Indonesian legislators differ systematically along party lines when it comes to sensitive issues of social and political tolerance. These findings are important for three reasons. First, the new data substantiate the notion that religion constitutes the major ideological divide in Indonesia's party system, a finding that is consistent with previous research on Indonesian political parties and our own previous analysis of the survey data.¹¹

Second, our findings suggest that this cleavage is not merely symbolic or superficial. Rather, it might have important implications for political preferences and public policy, beyond the formal role of Islam in the state. We explored three fields that have been the focus of much political debate in recent years, namely the economic and political role of Chinese Indonesian citizens, the nature of inequality, and fear of communism. Across the three areas, we find a common theme: *preferences over the role of Islam in politics predict politicians' attitudes*. This resonates with research on public opinion, which has started to show a strong association between political Islam and policy preferences, for instance with regard to views of regional autonomy.¹²

Finally, we think these results contribute to broader debates about the Indonesian party system. Some analysts suggest Indonesian political parties are more or less the same: they are dominated by oligarchic interests; they collude to hold on to power; and they are only weakly

institutionalised. Our analysis paints a more nuanced picture, as the data we have reviewed suggest that politicians are sorting into political parties, at least in part, according to their ideological leanings, which in turn are linked to their views on issues of socio-political pluralism and tolerance. Of course, the other possibility is that party members are reiterating or following the views expressed by their party leadership – but this still points to a level of institutionalisation and ideological differentiation that is often overlooked in the literature. While this is a preliminary analysis, the striking empirical associations we have uncovered indicate that political parties in Indonesia are more than a hollow vehicle for the personal ambitions and material interests of politicians.

In sum, Indonesian political parties are not all the same. There are clear ideological differences. While the principal cleavage is a religious one, it may be more significantly associated with policy positions than extant scholarship suggests. Taking ideology and party differentiation seriously is crucial to advancing our understanding of Indonesian politics.

¹ Dan Slater, "Party Cartelisation, Indonesian-Style," *East Asia Forum*, May 5, 2017 2018; Kuskridho Ambardi, "The Making of the Indonesian Multiparty System: A Cartelized Party System and Its Origin" (Ohio State University, 2008).

² Sofia Vasilopoulou and Katjana Gattermann, "Matching Policy Preferences: The Linkage between Voters and MEPs," *Journal of European Public Policy* 20, no. 4 (2013); Sebastian M Saiegh, "Recovering a Basic Space from Elite Surveys: Evidence from Latin America," *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 34, no. 1 (2009).

³ Lembaga Survei Indonesia (LSI) conducted the survey in late 2017 and early 2018. Only North Kalimantan, West Papua and West Sulawesi did not make the final cut. The survey covered a large number of issues, including legislators' attitudes to democracy, their religious views, their family and professional backgrounds, and their thoughts on the major political issues of the day.

⁴ Edward Aspinall et al., "Mapping the Indonesian Political Spectrum," *New Mandala*, May 5, 2017 2018. The population of this survey were all members of the DPRD I/Provincial legislature (excluding the PBB, PKPI, and Aceh local parties, a total of 2073 people) of the 2014 election results. The total sample of 508 DPRD I members was randomly selected by stratified random sampling method.

⁵ Eve Warburton and Edward Aspinall, "Indonesian Democracy: From Stagnation to Regression?," *The Strategist*, 17 August 2017.

⁶ Charlotte Setijadi, "Chinese Indonesians in the Eyes of the Pribumi Public," *ISEAS Perspective* 2017, no. 73 (2017).

⁷ Diego Fossati, Yew-Foong Hui, and Siwage Dharma Negara, *The Indonesia National Survey Project: Economy, Society and Politics*, vol. 2017, Trends in Southeast Asia (Singapore: ISEAS, 2017).

⁸ For instance, Indonesia's Gini coefficient rose from 0.3 in 2000 to 0.41 in 2015. See Nasir Sudirman, "Inequality Harms Health and Well-Being of All Indonesians – Not Just the Poor," *The Conversation*, September 5 2017.

⁹ Vedi R Hadiz, "A New Islamic Populism and the Contradictions of Development," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 44, no. 1 (2014).

¹⁰ "In Indonesia, a shadowy campaign to stoke unrest as elections loom." *Malay Mail*. 27 March 2018, accessed 7 June 2018, <https://www.malaymail.com/s/1608169/in-indonesia-a-shadowy-campaign-to-stoke-unrest-as-elections-loom>

¹¹ Marcus Mietzner, *Money, Power, and Ideology: Political Parties in Post-Authoritarian Indonesia* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2013), 167-91; Aspinall et al., "Mapping the Indonesian Political Spectrum."

¹² Islamist voters are more supportive of regional autonomy than secularist voters, as shown in Diego Fossati, "Support for Decentralisation and Political Islam Go Together in Indonesia," *ISEAS Perspective* 2017, no. 69 (2017). The degree to which this cleavage will encompass other policy areas, such as international economic policy, remains to be seen.

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