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Singapore | 4 March 2019

The Implications of a Ma'ruf Amin Vice-Presidency in Indonesia

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Recent polls indicate that the Joko Widodo (Jokowi)-Ma'ruf Amin pair has a comfortable lead over their opponents Prabowo Subianto-Sandiaga Uno for the upcoming presidential election.
- The selection of Ma'ruf as vice-presidential candidate was clearly aimed at boosting Jokowi's Islamic credentials. Given Ma'ruf's track record in pushing the Islamisation agenda to enhance his own stature as a politician and theologian, a Jokowi-Ma'ruf victory would create expectations among Muslims for Ma'ruf to use the vice-presidency to pursue his unfinished business in the Ulama Council of Indonesia (MUI), of which he is the current Chairman. This would include the Islamisation of society through strengthening the shariah economy and finance, halal consumption and halal tourism.
- However, Ma'ruf may be constrained by the limited powers accorded to the vice-president. How much of a political debt Jokowi would feel towards Ma'ruf is unclear, as it can be argued that he could have won on the strength of his own popularity. As vice-president, Ma'ruf may also have to be more sensitive towards the non-Muslims. He recently expressed regret for his involvement in the Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok) trial.

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INTRODUCTION

On 17 April 2019, Indonesia will elect its president. This election is different from previous ones for two reasons: first, it is held concurrently with the legislative elections; and second, the long campaigning period of eight months is unprecedented. The election is a rematch of the 2014 contest between incumbent Joko Widodo (Jokowi) and former military general Prabowo Subianto. But observers have shown more interest in the vice-presidential candidates this time around. President Jokowi has opted for a senior ulama (religious scholar) Kyai Haji Ma'ruf Amin,¹ who will be 76 years old this year. In turn, Prabowo picked businessman Sandiaga Uno, who is from his own party Gerindra, and who will be only 50 years old this year.

Comparing the two vice-presidential candidates, there are doubts if Ma'ruf can match Sandiaga's energy and outreach. The Prabowo camp chose Sandiaga for several reasons: he can attract women voters, identify closely with youths and millennials, and help finance Prabowo's campaign.² Attracting the millennials will be a challenge for Ma'ruf. On occasions when he was asked about his plans to win their hearts and mind, his responses, in very vague terms, was that he would be fighting for future generations.³

This article focuses on the prospects of a Jokowi-Ma'ruf Amin victory. It argues that while Ma'ruf's comments on Islamic matters during this campaigning period may contain progressive overtones, they should not be taken at face value. There is a consistent, core Islamic belief that resonates with Ma'ruf. To understand this core belief, one has to examine religious rulings he has issued in his personal capacity, and fatwas issued by the Ulama Council of Indonesia (MUI) which he endorsed. For example, his views on religious minorities, contending ideologies, and intra-faith diversity remain fairly consistent.

This article differentiates his politicisation of Islam—mainly his views with the intention to garner votes—from his theological viewpoints. The latter will resurface if he wins the elections. While Ma'ruf is unequivocal in his rejection of terrorism and radicalism, and in expressing his commitment to Pancasila (five philosophical principles of the Indonesian state) and NKRI (Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia), he has been consistent in his beliefs on the creation of an Islamic “alternative” to the existing economic and social system.

MA'RUF AND THE ROLE OF ISLAM

Observers were surprised when Jokowi announced Ma'ruf Amin as his running mate. There were rumours that he was not Jokowi's first choice, and that the president instead favoured former Constitutional Court judge Mahfud MD, but members of Jokowi's party PDI-P (Indonesian Democratic Party-Struggle) and its coalition partners had preferred Ma'ruf over Mahfud. One reason was that Ma'ruf is already in his mid-70s and unlikely to run for the presidency himself in 2024. This will give younger politicians from the coalition parties the chance to run for the post. Second, and the more important reason, is that Ma'ruf can rally conservative and traditionalist voters for Jokowi. Ma'ruf is Chairman of MUI, Chairman of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), and former Advisor (Wantimpres) to President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. He was also a key witness for the “Ahok” saga in 2016 and 2017, an issue which will be discussed shortly.

Ma'ruf's training is in the religious sciences. Born in 1943 in a village in Tangerang, Banten, Ma'ruf received his education in a religious boarding school (*pesantren*). He graduated with a degree in Islamic theology from the University of Ibn Khaldun in Jakarta, and was active within the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the largest Islamic organisation in the country. NU is a traditionalist organisation that runs boarding schools across the country. Its rival organisation, the Muhammadiyah, is identified mainly as a modernist organisation. Ma'ruf entered politics at a young age, running as a candidate in the 1971 election, and was elected to the Jakarta legislative assembly (DPRD). He was only 28 years old then, and a member of NU (then a political party) within an Islamic coalition PPP (United Development Party).⁴ However, he took a break from party politics and did not run in the 1982 election, but remained active in NU.⁵ He returned to politics after the 1998 Reformasi movement and the fall of Suharto. NU was divided at that time about whether the organisation should return as a political party, meaning a rethinking of its 1984 decision to stay out of formal politics. Ma'ruf was dismayed that NU members were not given any significant role in the Habibie cabinet (May 1998-October 1999), and that the Habibie government did not give due recognition to NU members despite the organisation being the largest Islamic organisation in Indonesia. Former NU chairman, who later became Indonesia's fourth President, Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur), initially disagreed with Ma'ruf's position that NU create a political party but later changed his mind and appointed Ma'ruf as the Head of Syura Council, the highest decision-making body of the National Awakening Party (PKB), which is affiliated with NU.⁶ This episode showed that Ma'ruf had always stayed interested in politics and reiterated his position that NU must play a political role even if not as a political party.

In 2000, Ma'ruf was appointed head of the Fatwa committee in the MUI, a very influential post in determining religious opinions for the whole of Indonesia. After Gus Dur's government was toppled in 2001, Ma'ruf became more active in MUI and the organisation grew to be a channel for this influence. MUI fatwas are however not legally binding. The committee nevertheless issued many controversial and conservative fatwas during the Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono presidency (2004-2014), when Ma'ruf was heading it.⁷ In 2005, the committee issued a fatwa called SIPILIS, a term coined to demonstrate its anti-secularism, anti-liberalism and anti-pluralism.⁸ Ma'ruf as the head of the committee signed off on the fatwa. The fatwa described the three labels loosely, without explicating their complexities. For example, pluralism is described as the understanding that all religions are equal and no one religion can claim to be the only correct one. It described liberalism as the use of reason to describe the religious texts, the Quran and Sunnah. Secularism is defined as the separation of worldly affairs from religious affairs. The fatwa did not give examples to substantiate the best way to govern Indonesia, nor did it take a position on an Islamic state. Under Ma'ruf's leadership of the committee, MUI also reaffirmed its 1980 position that the Ahmadiyah sect is not part of Islam. Its position on the sect was used by radicals to persecute Ahmadiyah followers. Similarly, MUI issued a fatwa questioning the legitimacy of Shias. It did not correct a fatwa from the East Java chapter of MUI which declared Shias deviant. Again, MUI's problematic claim has allowed groups to harm followers of the sect, in what is famously known as the Sampang Shia problem in East Java.⁹

While a lot of attention has been given to Ma'ruf's views on religious minorities, the cleric's views on other issues need to be examined too in order to understand where he will stand if elected vice-president. As a MUI leader, he lobbied legislators in the DPR to pressure the government to conform to his Islamic agenda. An interview with Ma'ruf published in 2012

indicated that MUI's role is to give inputs to legislators and the government. He opined that the way Indonesians live and participate as citizens are guided by shariah. He also believed that MUI has a role in advising the constitutional court.¹⁰ Ma'ruf made his way into powerful positions so that he could have his views heard. During the SBY presidency, he served on the Wantimpres, or Advisory council to the President. He stepped down after the end of SBY's term in 2014. In 2015, he made several inroads into civil society. First, he was appointed the Chairman of MUI, bypassing Dr Din Syamsuddin, who was Muhammadiyah Chairman and Deputy MUI Chairman. Din was also acting chairman for a year after MUI Chairman Shal Mahfudz passed away in 2014. Ma'ruf was elected as the head of Dewan Syariah of NU that same year.¹¹

From these influential posts, Ma'ruf made decisions that had important political implications. The most prominent example was his role in the 2016 mass protests against then-Jakarta Governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok) on blasphemy charges. In a campaign speech, Ahok mentioned that Muslims should not be deceived by how religious leaders had interpreted verse 51 of Al-Maidah. Ahok eventually lost the Jakarta gubernatorial elections in 2017 and was jailed after being found guilty of blasphemy. Ma'ruf contributed to Ahok's prosecution by becoming an important witness in the case, testifying that Ahok had committed blasphemy.

MA'RUF'S IMPACT ON JOKOWI'S CAMPAIGN

How has Ma'ruf impacted Jokowi's campaign? Some argue that unlike the 2014 presidential election, and the subsequent 2017 Jakarta and regional elections, religion will not be playing a key role, and instead economic issues will be the focus. Jokowi picked Ma'ruf mainly to shield himself from attacks by Muslim conservatives, but the president also has to defend his economic performance.

The country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth is below the 7 percent target he promised when he was elected in 2014.¹² If the election is to be fought along economic policies, then Prabowo made a better call by selecting Sandiaga, a prominent businessman. Sandiaga is also known to be popular among women voters and millennials, voters that Ma'ruf Amin cannot attract.

Polls have also shown that both Ma'ruf and Sandiaga have not made any significant impact on Jokowi's and Prabowo's standing. If the elections were to be held today, Jokowi is likely to win comfortably over Prabowo, and this would be due to Jokowi's popularity rather than Ma'ruf's. In a poll conducted by Indikator, Jokowi-Ma'ruf lead with 54.9 percent over Prabowo-Sandiaga's 32.8 percent. 9.2 percent remain undecided.¹³ The election being still two months away,¹⁴ Prabowo-Sandiaga may yet have a chance. Polling results have been relatively stable over the months. Jokowi-Ma'ruf also lead in a separate poll conducted by Charta Politik—at 47.4 percent against 30.6 percent for Prabowo-Sandiaga. For this survey, the sample size is 2000 respondents.¹⁵

Comparing the two vice-presidential candidates, Ma'ruf and Sandiaga are running neck and neck. In a survey published by *Tempo* in late October 2018, Ma'ruf's electability was 45.3 percent while Sandiaga's was 43.1 percent. In the same survey, Sandiaga clearly trails Ma'ruf by 20 percentage points (82 percent for Ma'ruf and 63 percent for Sandiaga) in terms

of how they are viewed religiously. On the flipside, Sandiaga leads his opponent through his assertive and commanding qualities, and his ability to handle national problems.¹⁶

It is only a matter of time before Ma'ruf's past, especially the fatwas he endorsed in MUI, haunts Jokowi's drive to present himself as a national and progressive Islamic leader. If this does not happen during the campaign period, it may after the election. In the first debate between the two presidential teams in January 2019, the human rights issue was raised. While Jokowi said that he did not have any human rights abuses in the past, a remark targeting Prabowo's past, Ma'ruf's views on religious minorities, and those who promoted different views seemed to be forgotten. MUI's fatwas on Shias and Ahmadis as deviant indirectly contributed to violence against the two groups, even though Ma'ruf did not personally instigate them. Interestingly, during a speech delivered in Singapore in October 2018, Ma'ruf considered liberals, secularists, pluralists as "leftists" for promoting religious freedom, as opposed to radicals who are "rightists".¹⁷ The point was made in passing, but it was consistent with the 2005 MUI fatwa. In a way, Ma'ruf has not changed his position, though his speeches now, interspersed with terms such as Islam Wasatiyyah, may earn him labels such as "moderate" or "centrist".¹⁸

While Ma'ruf may not have the desired impact on Jokowi's campaign, and the president may win with or without Ma'ruf anyway, questions remain as to what a Ma'ruf vice-presidency will mean for the country. To be sure, Ma'ruf is a strong advocate of Islamisation in Indonesia. He is a traditionalist religious leader just like any other NU leader, and thus dresses in a traditional way with sarong (a piece of cloth wrapped around the waist) and skull cap, but his views on economic, social and cultural issues pivot towards Islamic revivalism. Ma'ruf is a champion of the Islamic economy and finance, and one of the key drivers for Dewan Syariah Nasional (DSN) or National Syariah Board in MUI. This institution within MUI oversees shariah banking and finance and advises banks offering Islamic transactions. It is a requirement in Shariah Banking Law No 21/2008 that shariah banks host advisors from the DSN, and Ma'ruf is one of those who sit in many of the banks offering advice on shariah finance and banking. These shariah advisors are able to scrutinise whether bank transactions meet Islamic requirements and whether they contain *riba* (interests) which is forbidden in Islam.¹⁹

MUI leaders, including Ma'ruf, were also demanding that they define what is "moral" entertainment. They were active in pressuring the DPR to pass the anti-pornography law. But MUI was not only wanting the state to curb pornography, but what they described as pornoaction, which extends to clothing, kissing or close-proximity between non-married couples.²⁰ In 2012, MUI also expressed displeasure when American pop artist Lady Gaga was scheduled to hold a concert in Jakarta. Ma'ruf was heavily involved in these debates surrounding the Pornography Bill in 2012. He wanted the legislators to issue stringent criteria on the dressing of artists so that they conform to Islamic standards. MUI was also active in lobbying for legislation on halal consumption to be finalised in 2014, towards the end of the SBY years. There was a tussle between MUI (as a quasi-state institution) and the Ministry of Religious Affairs on who had the authority to issue the lucrative halal labels. It was decided that the ministry has authority over licensing, while MUI may only act in an advisory role through a panel of experts that determine whether products meet Islamic guidelines. Lastly, Ma'ruf was also in favour of shariah tourism, including the building of shariah hotels, and shariah spas to meet the demands of the conservative middle class.²¹ According to Ma'ruf, shariah tourism looks into the consumption requirements of Muslims,

including serving halal food and providing followers with their spiritual needs. One can interpret this as such that he is pointing to tour providers to engage MUI services, including appointing shariah advisors and applying for halal certification. All these services would incur fees and MUI would gain by providing them.

CONCLUSION

If the Jokowi-Ma'ruf pair wins the upcoming presidential elections, it is likely that in his capacity as vice-president, Ma'ruf will revisit his Islamisation policies. It is unlikely that Ma'ruf would want to transform Indonesia into an Islamic state, but he is likely to pursue regulations aimed at Islamising capitalist practices. Ma'ruf may even ask the president to undertake a more Islamic-inclined foreign policy, and his involvement in protests directed at the plight of the Palestinians point in that direction.

However, any fears that Ma'ruf Amin will change Jokowi's governing style is unfounded given the limited powers given the vice-president. Ma'ruf, for instance, was once a Wantimpres member under the Susilo government, yet his influence was limited. Ma'ruf's involvement in mass rallies, for example in the Ahok case, was more of him capitalising on such platforms, riding on the unhappiness of a few groups, rather than him being the mobilizer. Where Ma'ruf differs from Jokowi, he will have to defend his ideas before the broad spectrum of Indonesian society. He cannot be too conservative in front of the progressive camp, and those from Muhammadiyah, NU's rival, who also form part of Jokowi's presidential advisors. Early signs are there that Ma'ruf will seek to be conciliatory rather than push his conservative views in public. For example, he recently publicly mentioned that he regretted his involvement in the Ahok case, citing that he was mainly doing his job as head of MUI. Also, in a speech made in Singapore, he downplayed his conservative beliefs and appealed his audiences with the use of populist terms such as Islam Wasattiyah. Whatever agenda Ma'ruf has in mind, he will have to contend with the checks and balances afforded by, and broad diversity of, Indonesian society.

¹ The title Kyai means he is a graduate from a *pesantren* or Islamic boarding school, which also means that he is a qualified teacher. The title Haji means that he has performed the Haj ritual, which is obligatory for all Muslims. In Indonesia, titles manifest social standing and authority.

² *Tempo*, "Dismal running mates," October 22 2018.

³ Dylan Aprialdo Rachman, "Ma'ruf Amin Optimistis Dapat Banyak Dukungan dari kalangan Milenial," *Kompas*, 25 November 2018, <https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2018/11/25/17231221/maruf-amin-optimistis-dapat-banyak-dukungan-dari-kalangan-milenial>

⁴ In 1984, NU leaders decided to reinstate the organisation as an apolitical one, and it consequently ceased to be a political party.

⁵ Asrori Karni, *70 Tahun Dr. KH. Ma'ruf Amin: Pengabdian tiada henti kepada agama, bangsa dan negara*, (Jakarta: The Ibrahim Hosen Institute, 2014), p. 27.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 47.

⁷ Majelis Ulama Indonesia, *Himpunan Fatwa MUI Sejak 1975*, (Jakarta: Sekretariat Majelis Ulama Indonesia, 2015).

⁸ The acronym was derived from “syphilis”.

⁹ Majelis Ulama Indonesia, *Himpunan Fatwa MUI Sejak 1975*, pp. 95-101.

¹⁰ “Dr KH Ma’ruf Amin, “Ijtima’ akan bahas isu penting kebangsaan dan kenegaraan,” *Mimbar Ulama*, Edisi Khusus Ijtima’ Ulama 2012, pp. 70-72.

¹¹ The position of Rois Syuriah is equivalent to a Chairman of the organization which is to be differentiated from the Head of Tanfidziah (Executive Head) of the organization.

¹² Business Times, “Jokowi’s growth goal for Indonesia elusive as GDP rises 5.3 percent,”⁶ August 2018.

¹³ Indikator Politik Indonesia, Media social, hoaks, dan sikap partisan dalam pilpres 2019, http://www.indikator.co.id/uploads/20190115094013.Materi_Rilis_Pilpres_dan_Medsos_Januari_2019.pdf , 16-26 December 2018.

¹⁴ The sample size is 1220 respondents, while the Indonesian population is 268.3 million.

¹⁵ Charta Politik Indonesia, http://www.chartapolitika.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/201901161126_Rilis_Surnas_Charta-Politika-1.pdf

¹⁶ Tempo, 22 October 2018

¹⁷ RSIS Distinguished Public Lecture by Professor KH Ma’ruf Amin, 17 October 2018.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dP4g9k3zUs4>

¹⁸ Yang Razali Kassim, Ma’ruf Amin: Jokowi’s Secret Weapon? 1 November 2018

<https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/maruf-amin-jokowis-secret-weapon/#.XE-83Fwzbcc>, Ma’ruf used the term Islam Wasatiyyah or “centrist Islam” to indicate that he is not supporting radicals and liberals.

¹⁹ Norshahril Saat, *The State, Ulama and Islam in Malaysia and Indonesia* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), p.134. This is also based on an interview the author had with Ma’ruf Amin on 3 December 2012.

²⁰ Norshahril Saat, “Theologians moralising Indonesia: The case of the post-new order Ulama Council of Indonesia (MUI)”. *Asian Journal of Social Science* 44 (2016): 546-570.

²¹ Norshahril Saat, *The State, Ulama and Islam in Malaysia and Indonesia* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018). I attended the celebration of LPPOM-MUI (Assessment Institute for Foods, Drugs, and Cosmetics Indonesia Council of Ulama) 24th anniversary where Ma’ruf delivered the opening speech, touching on syariah tourism.

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