

PERSPECTIVE

RESEARCHERS AT ISEAS – YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE ANALYSE CURRENT EVENTS

Singapore | 10 September 2019

Lessons from Madura: NU, Conservatism and the 2019 Presidential Election

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Religion and ethnicity were significant factors in the 2019 Indonesian presidential elections, with Islamists and conservatives voting for Prabowo Subianto–Sandiaga Uno.
- Ethnicity also played a significant role in the election. The Javanese and non-Javanese were divided. The Madurese of East Java demonstrate how different ethnic communities, though from the same region, have different political inclinations. While Joko Widodo–Ma’ruf Amin won in East Java, they lost in Madura. Jokowi–Ma’ruf only won in Bangkalan.
- The election shows that Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) is not monolithic. Madura, an island made up of mostly NU followers, defied instructions from NU leaders to vote for Jokowi–Ma’ruf, because the Madurese tended to be more Islamist than the “pluralist” majority of NU members.
- Another factor was the deep deference to eminent religious teachers and following their political preferences. This was seen in both the substantial vote-swing to Jokowi in Bangkalan and the strong support for Prabowo in the rest of Madura.

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INTRODUCTION

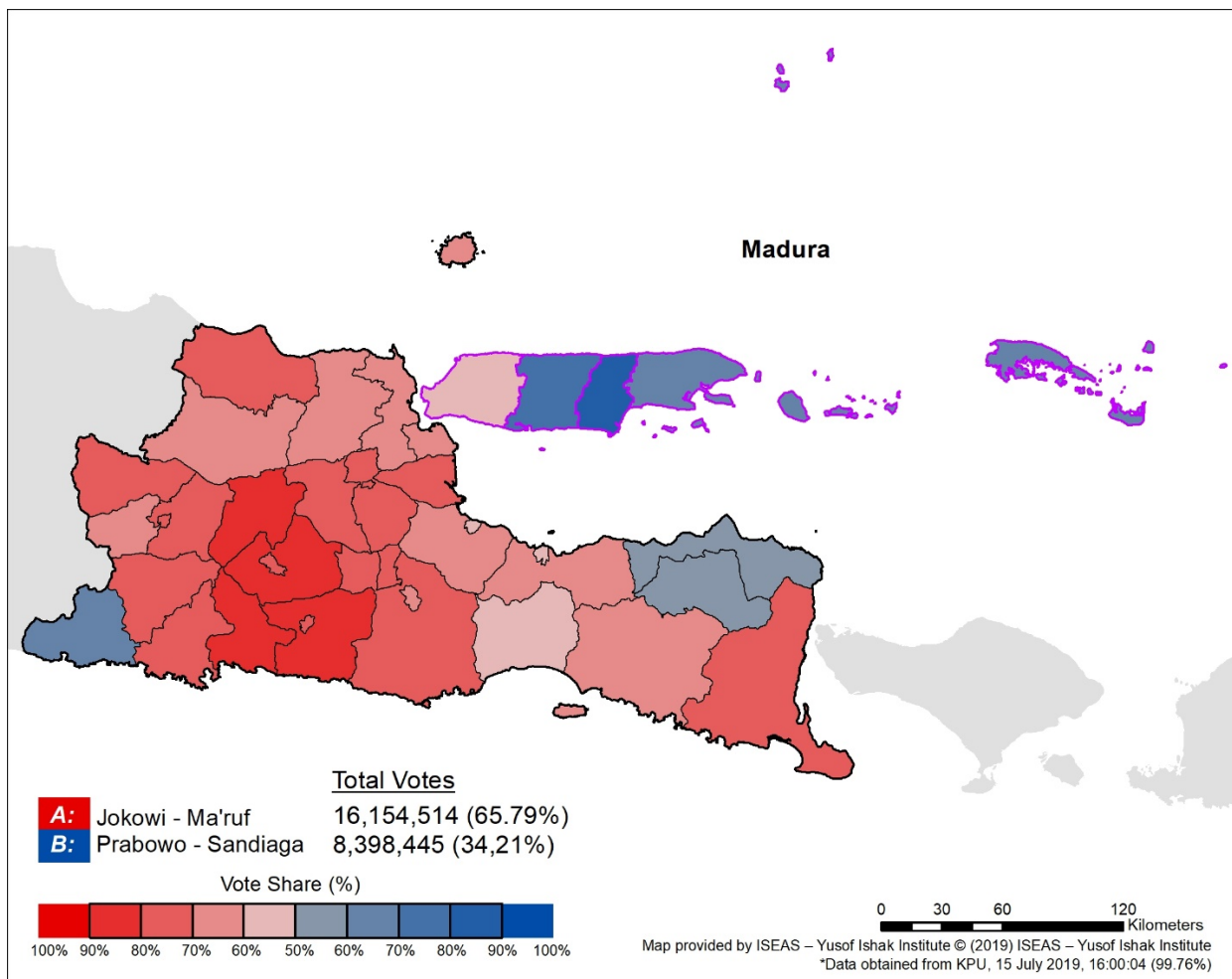
Unlike in previous presidential elections, the 2019 election saw the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), announcing full support for the incumbent, Joko Widodo (Jokowi). NU is the largest Muslim organization in Indonesia with about 50 million members and sympathizers, and its former *rois 'am* (supreme leader), Ma'ruf Amin, was Jokowi's running mate. As indicated by some analysts, the reasons for NU to do "*cancut tali wondo*" (be actively and fully involved)¹ in the election are varied. IPAC stated that it was "partly transactional, but its opposition to the Islamists behind Prabowo was deeply ideological".² In his ethnographic study of some *pesantrens* (traditional Islamic boarding schools) in Java, Edward Aspinall also found that the narratives adopted by some local *kyais* to support Jokowi-Ma'ruf were mostly ideological, most notably in counteracting Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI), radical Islam, Salafism and Wahabism.³ Although the transactional narratives were acknowledged by some, but the more important argument for these local *kyais* is ideological. The transactional narratives, which became common narratives in the circle of NU leaders and the elite of the NU-affiliated party, Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa (PKB, National Awakening Party), revolved around the issue of the number of seats in the cabinet, and the upgraded status of NU from being the main beneficiary of government aid to become *ashabul qoror* (decision maker) in the government.

To what extent did NU's support contribute to Jokowi's triumph? This is an important question since support for the side that turns out to be the winner (in this case Jokowi) becomes a bargaining chip in bargaining for positions in the cabinet. Already, some politicians are debating who and which party played the most important role in Jokowi's victory. Fachrudin emphasized the significance of NU's role by outlining the swing in several big *pesantrens* in East Java.⁴ For Shofia and Pepinsky, Ma'ruf Amin "was a crucial factor in Jokowi's victory", but he "did not create an advantage for Jokowi in NU-dominant districts". Ma'ruf's main contribution was to shield Jokowi from attacks by opponents who were using the religious card; in the NU context, he "eliminated Jokowi's relative disadvantage in NU-dominant districts".⁵

This article focuses on Madura, where almost 100 percent of the population are loyal NU members. Some have even joked that the religion of Madurese people is not Islam, but NU. Interestingly, despite their loyalty to NU, they defied instructions from the central leadership to vote for Jokowi. What factors made the Madurese people reject an incumbent who had chosen their *rois 'am* (supreme leader) as his vice-presidential candidate? Conversely, what explains the tremendous vote swing to Jokowi in Bangkalan from 18 percent in 2014 to 57 percent in 2019? Without excluding other possible factors, this article focuses on how religion shaped the voting pattern in Madura.

MADURA AND THE ELECTION RESULTS

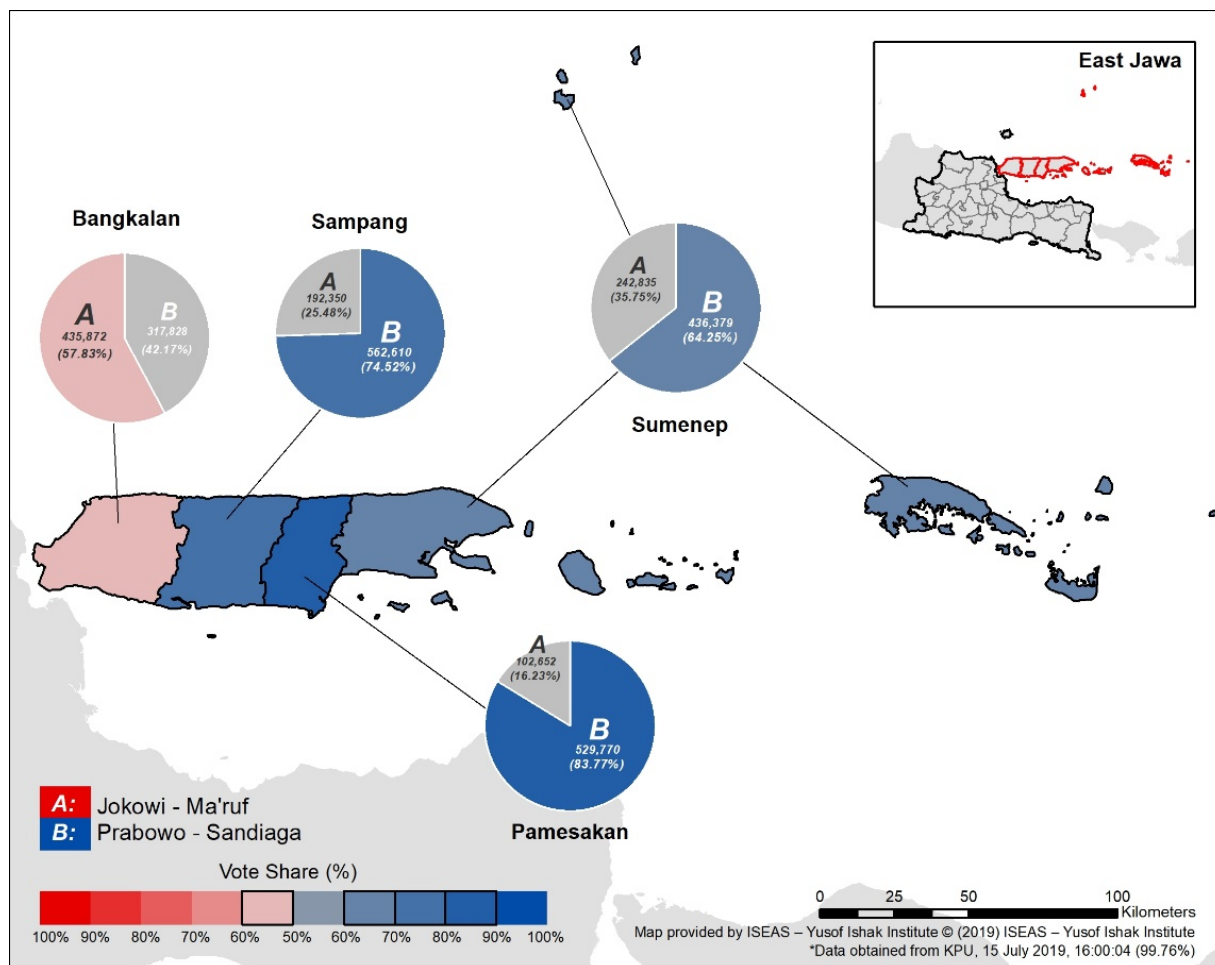
Although Madura is part of the East Java province, it has a culture that is distinct from that of other areas in that province. Scholars classify East Javanese culture into sub-cultures: Mataraman, Arek, Tapal Kuda, Osing and Madura. Madura has 3.9 million people or 10 percent of East Java's population of 39 million. Madurese people, however, are not limited to those who live in Madura island. A huge number of them live in other districts in East Java, such as Pasuruan, Situbondo, Bondowoso, and Jember.



Map 1: The Result of the 2019 Presidential Election in East Java

On 21 May 2019, the General Elections Commission (KPU) announced that Jokowi-Ma'ruf had won the presidential election with 55.50 percent of the votes, or a total of 85,607,362 votes. Prabowo-Sandi had received 68,650,239 or 44.50 percent of the votes. In East Java, Jokowi-Ma'ruf won with 65.7 percent of the votes, a significant increase (12 percent) from the 2014 presidential election. Back then, Jokowi-JK won with 53.17 percent while Prabowo-Hatta received 46.83 percent. The districts where Prabowo defeated Jokowi in 2019 are Sumenep, Sampang, Pamekasan, Bondowoso, Situbondo, and Pacitan. Except Pacitan, the home town of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, the other five are “Madurese” districts. Bondowoso and Situbondo are not on Madura island but have a huge number of Madurese people. It is often said that Bondowoso, Sutobondo, Jember and Pasuruan are “Madurese districts” outside Madura island.

The number of voters supporting Jokowi in the three districts in Madura decreased. He only won in Bangkalan, with huge swing votes. I call it a “magic swing” (*keajaiban*) because of the size of the swing—one cannot find a similar situation in any other district in the 2019 presidential election. In the 2014 presidential election, Prabowo-Hatta won in Bangkalan with 81.20 percent of the votes while Jokowi-JK only gained 18.80 percent. In 2019, however, Jokowi-Ma'ruf won with 57.83 percent of the votes and the support for Prabowo decreased tremendously to 42.1 percent.



Map 2: The Result of the 2019 Presidential Election in Madura

FACTORS: FPI, CONSERVATISM, AND THE VENERATION OF *HABAIB*

From a religious perspective, there are several factors that contributed to Jokowi's defeat in Madura. The first was the growth of the Front of Defenders of Islam (FPI) and a long-held tradition of venerating *habaib*. One respondent, a *kyai* and the head of an NU branch in East Java, explained that instead of Banser, the paramilitary group under NU, it is Islam Defender Troop (LPI), the paramilitary group under FPI, that has grown in size in Madura.⁶ This statement is confirmed by a number of events where NU and FPI had collaborated, such as *Tabligh Akbar* to celebrate the Islamic New Year in Pamekasan on 2 October 2018, and with *Haul Akbar Masyayikh dan Habaib Se-Madura* in Sampang on 26 February 2019.

The growth of FPI in Madura can be attributed to the role of Rizieq Syihab and other *habaib*. Quoting a statement from Muhaimin Iskandar, the chairman of PKB, the reason why NU members in Madura preferred to join FPI [rather than Banser] is simply because they can wear *sorban* and *jubah*. He says: "By joining FPI, they can wear turbans and robes. In NU, only district level *kyai* can wear *sorban* and *jubah*. *Kyai* at sub-district and village levels are shy about wearing robes. Wearing *sorban* and *jubah* is somewhat restricted in NU circle. Conversely, by joining FPI they can immediately use the turban and there is no hesitation about wearing the dress code."⁷ This is a simplified explanation for something that actually has deep roots in Madurese, i.e. the veneration of *habaib* and the love of imitating their way

of life, including the dress code. Because FPI is led by a *habib* and using white dress as its uniform, it attracts Madurese people to join.

As a counterweight to what is commonly perceived as “misguided Arabism”,⁸ since 2015, NU has intensively promoted “Islam Nusantara”. In Madura, however, Arab and Arabness are still regarded as a model of religious life. As shown by Mirjam Lucking, Madurese people are very keen and proud about imitating Arab traditions, particularly the dress code.⁹ The above statement by Muhaimin Iskandar reveals a unique tradition in Madurese society. Their respect for Arab people is probably an extension of their veneration for KH Kholil of Bangkalan (1820-1923) or Syaikhona Kholil, believed to be of Yamani or hadhrami origin, i.e. from the Basyaiban family.¹⁰

All of this provides a platform for Habib Rizieq Syihab and FPI to grow in Madura. Syihab was an influential figure, if not the most important one, in the 212 action. Although he is living in exile in Saudi Arabia, his influence can be felt during the series of *ijtima ulama* that endorsed the candidacy of Prabowo-Sandi. His picture, together with those of Prabowo and Sandi placed below him, illustrated his role as spiritual protector for Prabowo-Sandi, and were easily found in various places during the campaign time. His position and choice in the election were followed by members of FPI, including in Madura and, according to a respondent, the majority of *habaib* in East Java.¹¹ This was one reason why Madurese people defied instructions from the leaders of NU to vote for Jokowi. The number of votes for Prabowo in Sampang, Pamekasan and Sumenep actually increased. Although Madurese people are loyal and fanatical members of the NU, they are not similar to NU members in Java, and are closer to its “conservative faction” or the “FPI faction”.

The second factor is the growth of conservatism. Since 2012, Madura has been known for its exclusivism and sectarianism against the Shi’ite community in Sampang. The Shi’ite people were not only declared infidels, they were also displaced from their homes and villages. Hundreds of them have been living in a shelter house, Puspa Agro in Sidoarjo, since their expulsion in 2012.¹² MUI branches in Madura are among the first to issue fatwas declaring Shi’ah a deviant group in Islam. Members of MUI from this island have also lobbied the central board of MUI and NU leaders to follow suit or to endorse their fatwas.

The case of Sampang has not been resolved fully, and some ulama in Madura still reject the return of the displaced Shi’ite community to their villages.¹³ This discrimination against the Shi’ite community in Sampang is the most important indicator of conservatism in Madura. Another is the initiative to implement Shari’a by-laws in Madura. Pamekasan, for instance, has implemented three Shari’a-based by-laws, i.e. Perda No. 18 2001 on the Prohibition of Alcoholic Beverages, Perda No. 18 2004 on the Prohibition of Prostitution, and Perda No. 05 2014 on Controlling Activities during the Month of Ramadan. Furthermore, a large number of Madurese participated in the 212 rally to depose Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok) in Jakarta in December 2016.¹⁴ It is not surprising that in the 2019 presidential election a large number of Madurese joined other conservative Muslim groups in support of Prabowo. Despite being dominated by NU, Madura has the same religious characteristics as Aceh, West Sumatra, and West Java. It seems that the more Islamist or conservative an area, the more the tendency had been to vote for Prabowo in the 2019 presidential election.

The growth of FPI and the discrimination against the Shi’te community seem to be two parallel developments related to rising conservatism. However, that is not the case in

Madura and in Indonesia, in general. Rizieq Syihab and FPI, for instance, tend to be tolerant of the Shi'ite community and there seems to be no story of FPI attacking or discriminating against Shi'a. During the election, however, FPI worked with Islamists and anti-Shi'ah and anti-minority groups to defeat Jokowi. The voting result in Madura is the story of this combination.

The third factor is the influence of Pesantren Sidogiri of Pasuruan and Pesantren Asembagus of Situbondo. These two pesantrens have alumni in Madura, and some teachers or *kyais* in those *pesantrens*, such as Lora Kholil As'ad of Situbondo and Abdulloh Syaikat Siroj of Sidogiri, decided to support Prabowo, and the tradition in *pesantren* for students and alumni to follow and obey teachers saw these latter being influenced in that direction.¹⁵

The support for Prabowo in Sidogiri is rooted in the conservative tendency of the *pesantren*, highlighted by its opposition to “deviant” groups such as Shi'ah and Ahmadiyya. They claim that this is the correct NU and even name it NU *Garis Lurus* or NUGL (straight or correct path of NU). This position goes in opposition to the leaders of NU, particularly Said Aqil Siradj (SAS). One of the publications from Sidogiri on this issue is *Sidogiri menolak pemikiran KH. Said Aqil Siroj* (2016).¹⁶ Alex Arifianto¹⁷ argues that besides being involved in promoting NUGL, they have been criticizing SAS' views and opposing him since the Congress of NU in Jombang in 2015.¹⁸

MAGICAL SWING IN BANGKALAN

The construction of Suramadu (Surabaya-Madura) bridge has helped the social and economic development of Madura. Bangkalan, an adjacent district to Suramadu, reaped most of the benefits. The bridge has facilitated Madurese people travelling to Surabaya for education or social and economic activities, and it is said that this partly contributed to the swing from Prabowo to Jokowi in the 2019 presidential election. This analysis assumes that the more educated and the more prosperous people are, the more likely that they would have voted for Jokowi. As indicated by various studies, this is evidently not true.¹⁹ Ethnicity and religion have played more significant roles in the election.²⁰

One of my respondents explained: “Do you want to have a good answer or a true answer?” The good answer, according to her, is that Bangkalan people are now more educated and economically better off than before. They are also becoming more “*melek politik*” (aware of political contestation). This transformation began after the Suramadu bridge opened in 2009.

However, the main factor for the swing is not the construction of Suramadu bridge and the advancement of economy and education in Bangkalan. Patron-client politics plays a significant role in Indonesian democracy. In the Bangkalan context, Fuad Amin, the former mayor of Bangkalan who was in jail for corruption during the election, is a powerful figure. Amin is a great-grandson of Syaikhona Kholil of Bangkalan. During the election, many from Madura visited him in jail for his blessings. His instructions were therefore heard by people there. Some politicians believe that Fuad Amin was the key player in Bangkalan, and when he instructed people to vote for Jokowi through a video message recorded from jail, that unleashed the tremendous “magical” swing in Bangkalan.²¹

CONCLUSION

Madura is a microcosm of the tension within the NU, the largest Muslim organization in the world, between conservatism and pluralism. The result of the 2019 presidential election in Madura shows that the supposed binary situation between “NU versus the rest of Islam” or “traditionalist Muslims versus Islamists” is not justified. The relationship between Islam and politics in Indonesia is more complex and complicated than that. As with conservative groups, moderate groups of Islam are not a monolithic entity. Although NU in general has been perceived as the champion of pluralism and moderation, it has another face—the “Madura faction of NU” that is more easily included in the category of the “conservative faction of NU”. In the 2019 election, they refused to follow the instruction of NU leaders to vote for Jokowi-Ma’ruf. Outside the election, although they are loyal and fanatical members of NU, the religious character of Madurese people also makes them different from the general membership of NU. They tend to be more conservative and exclusive. The well-documented discrimination against Shi’ite community in Sampang is the most popular example. Thus, the challenge for the tolerant position and brand of NU does not only come from outside, but from within NU as well. NU factionalism may perhaps become an issue in the NU Congress that is to be held in 2020.

Besides the religious issue, Bangkalan district provides a good example of how the patron-client relationship still plays a role in Indonesian democracy. If the kyai says that the winner should be Prabowo, then the result of the voting would follow accordingly. Whoever control the local leaders or *kyai* get the votes of the Madurese. Such is Indonesian democracy.

¹ Ainur Rofiq al Amin, “NU di Pusaran Pilpres 2019”, *Kompas*, 13 Februari 2019, p. 7.

² IPAC Report, “Anti-Ahok to Anti-Jokowi: Islamist influence on Indonesia’s 2019 Election Campaign”, No. 55, 15 March 2019.

http://file.understandingconflict.org/file/2019/03/Report_55.pdf

³ Edward Aspinall, “Indonesia’s election and the return of ideological competition”, *New Mandala*, 22 April 2019. <https://www.newmandala.org/indonesias-election-and-the-return-of-ideological-competition/>

⁴ Azis Anwar Fachrudin, “Jokowi and NU: the view from the pesantren”, *New Mandala*, 11 April 2019. <https://www.newmandala.org/jokowi-and-nu-the-view-from-the-pesantren/>; Azis Anwar Fachrudin, “Ma’ruf and NU Factor”, *The Jakarta Post*, 18 May 2019.

<https://www.thejakartapost.com/academia/2019/05/18/maruf-and-nu-factor.html>

⁵ Naila Shofia and Tom Pepinsky, “Measuring the ‘NU effect’ in Indonesia’s election”, *New Mandala*, 1 July 2019. <https://www.newmandala.org/measuring-the-nu-effect-in-indonesias-election/>; Ahmad Najib Burhani, “Ma’ruf Amin: A Shield from Identity Politics, but not a Vote-getter?”, *ISEAS Commentary*, No. 108, 21 December 2018.

<https://www.iseas.edu.sg/medias/commentaries/item/8752-maruf-amin-a-shield-from-identity-politics-but-not-a-votegetter-by-ahmad-najib-burhani>

⁶ Interview with the head of an NU branch in East Java on 9 April 2019. Further information on the growth of FPI, see Ahmad Zainul Hamdi, “Radicalizing Indonesian Moderate Islam from Within: The NU-FPI Relationship in Bangkalan, Madura”, *Journal of Indonesian Islam*, 07 (1 / June 2013): 71-95.

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- ⁷ <https://kumparan.com/@kumparannews/cerita-cak-imin-soal-warga-nu-di-madura-yang-bergabung-dengan-fpi-27431110790551276>; <https://news.detik.com/berita/d-4127979/cak-imin-bandingkan-tradisi-berserban-di-nu-dengan-fpi> (accessed 6 August 2019).
- ⁸ <http://www.suaramuhammadiyah.id/2017/01/18/syafii-maarif-hindari-misguided-arabism-umat-islam-harus-keluar-dari-kotak/>; <https://nasional.tempo.co/read/896939/di-depan-uskup-buya-syafii-beberkan-bahaya-arabisme-sesat> (accessed 8 August 2019).
- ⁹ Mirjam Lucking, “Beyond Islam Nusantara and ‘Arabization’ — Capitalizing ‘Arabness’ in Madura, East Java”, *Asien* 139 (2016): 5–24.
- ¹⁰ Rifai, Muhamad. 2009. *K.H.M. Kholil Bangkalan: biografi singkat, 1820-1923*. Jogjakarta: Garasi; Imron, Fuad Amin. 2012. *Syaikhona Kholil Bangkalan penentu berdirinya Nahdlatul Ulama*. Surabaya: Khalista.
- ¹¹ Interview with a *kyai* and leader of NU in Kediri, East Java, on 8 June 2019.
- ¹² M. Afdillah, *Dari Masjid ke Panggung Politik: Melacak Akar-akar Kekerasan Agama antara Komunitas Sunni dan Syiah di Sampang, Jawa Timur*. Yogyakarta: Center for Religious and Cross-cultural Studies, 2016.
- ¹³ <https://nasional.tempo.co/read/1098059/jenazah-pengungsi-syiah-dari-sampang-ditolak-penduduk-kampungnya>
- ¹⁴ <http://beritatrans.com/2017/02/20/40-bus-angkut-massa-demo-212-dari-surabaya-madura-sudah-tiba-di-jakarta/>
- ¹⁵ <https://duta.co/hari-ini-para-habaib-kiai-dan-ulama-jatim-deklarasi-dukung-prabowo-sandi-di-sidogiri/>
- ¹⁶ Tim penulis Pondok Pesantren Sidogiri, *Sidogiri Menolak Pemikiran KH Said Aqil Siroj*. Penerbit Sidogiri, 2012.
- ¹⁷ Alexander Arifianto. “Practicing What It Preaches? Understanding the Contradictions between Pluralist Theology and Religious Intolerance within Indonesia’s Nahdlatul Ulama”, *Al-Jāmi‘ah: Journal of Islamic Studies*, 55 (2, 2017): 241-264; Alexander Arifianto, “Nahdlatul Ulama is home to its own hardliners”, *New Mandala*, 8 August 2018. <https://www.newmandala.org/nadhlatul-ulama-home-hardliners/>
- ¹⁸ The support from Sidogiri for Prabowo has a somewhat superficial ethnic connection—the founder of Pesantren Sidogiri is a Hadhrami. However, it must be emphasized that some Hadhrami are against Rizieq Syihab and voted for Jokowi.
- ¹⁹ Recent trends in Indonesia are the reverse. Previously, socioeconomic advancement was correlated to tolerance. In some cases, however, as indicated by Mietzner and Muhtadi, “Muslims with high education and income were more intolerant than Muslims with low education and income”. This is particularly true for those influenced by conservatism. During the election, these educated and socioeconomically advanced, but religiously conservative, Muslims flocked to Prabowo’s side. Marcus Mietzner and Burhanuddin Muhtadi. “Explaining the 2016 Islamist Mobilisation in Indonesia: Religious Intolerance, Militant Groups and the Politics of Accommodation.” *Asian Studies Review*. 42.3 (2018): 484.
- ²⁰ A more detail explanation on the role of ethnicity and religion in the election can be found in Tom Pepinsky’s “Religion, Ethnicity, and Indonesia’s 2019 Presidential Election” at <https://tompepinsky.com/2019/05/27/religion-ethnicity-and-indonesias-2019-presidential-election/> (accessed 22 August 2019). Here he explains that religious sentiment is more important in determining vote behaviour than economy and education in the 2019 presidential election.
- ²¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IG7tdYAkEtg> (accessed 22 August 2019).

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