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Indonesia's National Elections: Islamic Parties at the Crossroads

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Synopsis

Indonesian Islamic parties have been adopting an inclusive and pragmatic strategy for garnering votes. The formal establishment of Shariah law is no longer a primary objective in their agenda. Nevertheless, these parties still have to settle several issues.

Commentary

WITH INDONESIA'S national legislative elections approaching in 2014, Islamic parties have signalled a pragmatic shift to the centre to garner popular support by transforming themselves into inclusivist parties. Their party platforms no longer feature the establishment of Shariah law and other Islamic agendas, while turning to more pluralistic political reforms and adopting democracy as their main strategy for winning the political contest.

Nevertheless the struggle for the installation of Shariah has not been abandoned, but only relegated to the back burner. The shift in their objective from an Islamist to a pluralist agenda may reflect the declining popularity of Islamic parties in Indonesia.

Still for Shariah law?

The popular votes for Islamic parties have declined significantly from their peak in 1999. The United Development Party (PPP) gained about 11% of the seats in 1999 but only got 8% in 2004 and 5% in 2009. Meanwhile the National Awakening Party (PKB) earned around 13% in 1999, but only got 11% in 2004 and less than 5% in 2009. Similarly the National Mandate Party (PAN) which secured about 7% in 1999, declined to 6.4% in 2004 and 6% in 2009. On the other hand the more progressive Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) performed slightly better than its counterparts. As PKS only ran in the election from 2004, the party won about 7.3% in 2004 and 7.8% in 2009.

In comparison the nationalist and secular parties like Golkar and the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP) won respectively 22% and 34% of the legislative seats in 1999; 22% and 19% in 2004; and 14.4% and 14% in 2009. Meanwhile the Democrat Party (PD) which entered the election fray in 2004 won around 7% in its debut and jumped massively to almost 21% in 2009.

The decline of votes for the Islamic parties was not merely due to the change in their political orientation. There were also other contributing factors, such as mismanagement, corruption, internal conflict, lack of leaders and

poor performance in their governance, particularly in provincial and regional governments.

Thus the PKS which won in the West Java Gubernatorial election of 2008 was unable to prevent the Muslim-backed candidate for governor of Jakarta from losing to an outsider backed by the secular nationalist PDI-P in the 2012 gubernatorial election.

In light of these shifts in voter support will the Islamic parties still advocate Shariah law and an Islamic state? What will be the effects of attempting to implement Shariah law on Indonesia's political map? Will increasing religious conservatism among the population prompt the Islamic parties to change their political strategy?

Divided views on Islamic agenda

Although Indonesia has the largest Muslim population in the world, comprising 85% of the country, there are many Muslims, apart from non-Muslims, who have opposed previous attempts to include Shariah in the Jakarta Charter or turn Indonesia into an Islamic state. Islamic groups have factored this sizeable minority in their political campaign and understand that a coercive approach to push an Islamic agenda will not only threaten the unity of the Indonesian republic but also cause them to lose popular support.

Nevertheless Islamic groups have long enjoyed a favourable position within the political spectrum of Indonesia, with two mass organisations providing them popular support, namely the Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah. Towards the end of his 30-year rule former President Suharto acknowledged their role and sought to coopt Islamic groups. Following the collapse of the Suharto regime and the decentralisation of the political system, Islamic groups have flourished.

However the blossoming of Islamic parties has caused a fragmentation of their voter support while weakening their ability to unite on a single agenda. Divisions also sharpened among the groups. Although contesting for the Islamic votes, these parties have agreed to accept democracy as an all-purpose tool to capture mainstream votes. Some Islamic groups however, such as the Hizbut Tahrir of Indonesia, reject the democracy system and choose to strive outside the system.

With respect to the fragmented votes, the secretary general of PKS, Mahfudz Siddiq, recently stated that if the Islamic parties want to have an Islam-oriented presidential candidate, they must maintain effective communication between themselves. Internal friction and disputes among the parties must also be settled.

The debate among Islamic parties over whether Shariah law will be instituted in Indonesia would not end just yet. And bringing up the issue of Shariah certainly creates tension among potential voters. Even among and within Islam groups, there are different views pertaining to the establishment of Shariah. Disagreement among these groups over instituting Shariah may be sharpening as well. This in turn would lead to unwarranted competition among dominant Islamic parties with a stake in the issue.

Increasingly conservative and critical society

Meanwhile nationalist parties have joined the fray over political Islam, which is no longer the monopoly of Islamic parties. A burgeoning conservatism among the voters has led nationalist parties to join the bandwagon of supporting several Shariah-based policies in some provinces and districts.

While the growing conservatism provides a chance for Islamic parties to boost their electoral power, they have to change their approach to compete against the nationalist parties. Islamic parties need to improve their track record in solving mismanagement issues, settling internal frictions, and eradicating corruption. With society becoming more critical at the same time, this will not be an easy task. The massive flow of information both from mainstream and social media makes the situation even more complex.

These Islamic parties may face the question whether to maintain their current pragmatic approach or re-Islamise their strategy. But it is paramount for the Islamic parties to overcome their declining performances first in order to survive and enhance or even maintain their current electoral support. The various Islamic groups will have little choice but to consolidate themselves as a unified political movement and modify their strategy to meet the increasingly conservative and critical landscape.

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