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Indonesian Presidential Election 2019

Islam and Indonesia's Presidency Race: A Defining Role?

By Alexander R. Arifianto

Synopsis

With Indonesia's presidential election only one year away, there is a consensus among observers that Islam will play a more important role in this upcoming election. Both President Joko Widodo and his potential opponents are courting the Islamic vote.

Commentary

AS INDONESIA gears up for the presidential election even though it is still a year away, President Joko Widodo (Jokowi) is poised to seek re-election for a second five-year term. In fact, he has already secured endorsement from several political parties, most importantly from his own Indonesian Democratic Party Struggle (PDIP) and the Golkar Party, which together control 36 percent of seats of the House of Representatives (DPR).

However, what is going to make the 2019 presidential election different from previous ones is that all potential candidates have to show they possess strong Islamic credentials if they hope to go far. The pressure to accommodate Islamic groups has become more pronounced after the 2016/17 Jakarta gubernatorial election. Rallies in the name of "Defending Islam" by the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) and other conservative Islamic groups led to the landslide defeat of former Jakarta Governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (popularly known as Ahok) – a close ally of Jokowi after protesters accused him of committing blasphemy against Islam.

Conservative Muslim Challenge

Many former Defending Islam protesters have formed a '212 Alumni' group - named

after the largest Defending Islam rally held on 2 December 2016. Kapitra Ampera, a member of the group's advisory board – has stated his movement was founded in order “to elect observant Muslims to all elected office – as local and national legislators, local executives, and president of the Republic of Indonesia”.

The ‘212 Alumni’ members agree that their goal is the defeat of President Jokowi in his 2019 re-election bid, arguing that Jokowi has issued policies that are “detrimental to the interests of Indonesian Muslims”. The instance often cited is the recent introduction of the Emergency Regulation (*Perppu*) Number 2/2017 on Civil Society Organisations seen as designed to “criminalise members of the clergy (*ulama*)”.

However, despite their common goal to defeat Jokowi, there is no consensus among ‘212 Alumni’ group members on the candidate they plan to support to oppose Jokowi in the election. Some group members have proposed Rizieq Shihab – FPI spiritual leader and chief organiser of the Defending Islam rallies who is now in self-imposed exile in Saudi Arabia – as their presidential candidate.

However, many group members prefer to back likely candidates who come from more mainstream background. These include Prabowo Subianto, Chairman of the Gerindra Party, who officially declared his presidential candidacy on 12 April, Anies Baswedan, current governor of Jakarta who defeated Ahok last year, and retired General Gatot Nurmantyo, former Commander in Chief of the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI).

Some of these candidates have made overtures to attract support from conservative Muslim voters. General Gatot, for instance, recently praised Rizieq Shihab as having a very good understanding of the *Pancasila* – Indonesia's national ideology. He does not believe the FPI leader wished to implement Islamic (*shari'a*) law in Indonesia; indeed he gave a different interpretation by saying that since 2013, FPI has adopted a platform called NKRI Bersyariah or the Unitary State of Republic Indonesia under *shari'ah* law.

Likely ‘Dark Horse’?

Other conservative Muslim activists have looked beyond the list of most commonly touted presidential candidates and are looking for a candidate who has both an ulama background and a successful record leading an Indonesian region – similar to Jokowi prior to his election as Indonesia's president. They believe the person who meets these criteria is Tuan Guru Bajang (real name Muhammad Zainul Majdi), the current governor of West Nusa Tenggara (NTB) province.

Majdi is described by his supporters as a perfect alternative to Jokowi. Majdi is someone who has successfully completed two consecutive terms as governor of his province, but also possesses strong Islamic credentials. He is a graduate of Al Azhar University in Cairo – considered by many Muslims as the most important Islamic higher education institution in the world.

Majdi is also a grandson of Tuan Guru Pancor, founder of *Nahdlatul Wathan*, the largest Islamic organisation in West Nusa Tenggara province, further enhancing his credentials as an Islamic scholar (*alim*).

Majdi's supporters organised a Twitter campaign on 11 March 2018, asking former president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, chairman of the Democrat Party, to consider him as a potential presidential or vice-presidential candidate sponsored by the party. The Twitter petition was repeated hundreds of thousand times online, catapulting Majdi, who was previously an unknown presidential aspirant, to the status of a potential leading contender for the election.

Jokowi's Response

Given the strong pressure from conservative Islamic groups to elect someone with strong Islamic affiliation as the next Indonesian president, President Jokowi is likely to bolster his own Islamic credentials to win over the support of prospective voters with pious background.

Jokowi is almost certain to nominate someone with a strong Islamic background as his vice presidential candidate, similar to his outgoing vice president Jusuf Kalla. Potential candidates include Muhaimin Iskandar, chairman of the National Awakening Party (PKB), affiliated with Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) - Indonesia's largest Islamic organisation; Muhammad Romahurmuziy, chairman of the United Development Party (PPP); and Mahfud MD, a senior politician from PKB and former chief justice of the Constitutional Court.

The presidential election is still one year away and many issues have not been resolved. However, one certainty is that Islam is going to play a defining role in it. Both Jokowi and his opponents are going to tout their Islamic credentials, presenting themselves and their policies to be the most 'friendly towards Islam' to appeal to Indonesian Muslim voters who comprise 87 percent of the country's population.

However, whether the use of Islamic symbols during the campaign will remain peaceful or become divisive, or will introduce new mobilisers similar to the Defending Islam rallies against Ahok last year is still an open question.

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