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## Indonesia's New Parties: Evolving Conservative Landscape?

*By Alexander R. Arifianto*

### SYNOPSIS

*In the past few months, several new political organisations and parties were founded as vehicles to attract support from a growing conservative Islamist constituency. Why are these entities, such as KAMI, New Masyumi and Ummah Party, emerging?*

### COMMENTARY

ON 10 NOVEMBER 2020, Rizieq Shihab – Indonesia's controversial Islamist preacher and founder of the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) – returned home after three years of self-imposed exile in Saudi Arabia. He was greeted by [tens of thousands of supporters](#), a scene reminiscent of the 2016/17 Defending Islam Action rallies in Jakarta for which he was instrumental in sponsoring and organising.

Rizieq's return to Indonesia seems to be part of a concession by the Indonesian government to defuse any efforts by him, FPI, and the Defending Islam Alumni Network to undermine the Joko Widodo ('Jokowi') administration. The enthusiastic greeting from his followers also signifies that support for conservative expressions of political Islamism is gaining ground in Indonesia. Surveys have shown that [up to 40 percent](#) of Indonesian Muslims can be categorised as Islamists, as indicated by their support for the enactment of Islamic principles in the Indonesian legal and political system.

### Prabowo's 'Betrayal' and Leadership Vacuum

Many Islamist activists who joined the 2016/17 rallies became ardent supporters of retired General Prabowo Subianto in his unsuccessful electoral challenge against Jokowi during the 2019 presidential election. However, they felt betrayed after

Prabowo decided to align himself with Jokowi and joined the president's second term cabinet; this led them to abandon Prabowo and his Gerindra Party.

Prabowo's turnaround caused a vacuum in leadership for Indonesians who are religiously conservative and wish to have Islamic values reflected in the country's public and social policies. In the past few months, several new political parties and organisations with Islamist platforms were established to accommodate the need of this constituency to be represented in Indonesia's public sphere.

A new group called the Action Coalition to Save Indonesia (KAMI) was established [the day after](#) Indonesia's 75th Independence celebration, on 18 August 2020. The group was formed by retired General Gatot Nurmantyo, a former Indonesian Army Chief of Staff; Din Syamsuddin, a former general chairman of Muhammadiyah, Indonesia's second largest Islamic organisation; and some 150 other retired politicians.

KAMI is a 'rainbow' organisation – albeit with a strong Islamist presence – which aims to unite the opposition against President Jokowi. It made a major public presence in the past month as its members staged demonstrations against the newly-passed Omnibus Job Creation Law sponsored by the government.

### **New Islamist Parties**

Several new political parties were formed in the past few months by politicians and groups wishing to develop stronger linkages with the conservative Islamist constituency. On 1 October 2020, Amien Rais, a former Muhammadiyah chairman and founder of the Muhammadiyah-linked National Mandate Party (PAN), announced the formation of [a new party](#) called the Ummah Party (*Partai Ummat*).

Unlike PAN, which was founded as a nationalist party and adopted Indonesia's national ideology of Pancasila, *Partai Ummat* adopts the Islamic principle of monotheism (*tauhid*) as its core value.

This means the new party sees pious Muslims, particularly those adhering to conservative Islamist principles, as its primary constituency. It is not an inclusivist party for all Indonesians irrespective of their ideological and religious backgrounds – as how PAN was conceived when Amien Rais founded it during the early *Reformasi* years.

Weeks later, the [New Masyumi Party](#) was established by Cholil Ridwan, head of the Indonesian Council for Islamic Propagation (*Dewan Dakwah Islam Indonesia*). It claimed itself as the successor to the Masyumi Party – one of Indonesia's leading Islamist parties during its first democratic period (1950 to 1959).

### **From Politics to Religious Activism**

Running on a platform to implement Islamic law (*shari'a*) as the foundation of the Indonesian state, Masyumi was one of the four largest parties in the Indonesian parliament during the 1950s. Masyumi was legally prohibited in 1959 as it was one of the few parties which opposed President Sukarno's rollback against Indonesian democracy back then.

The ban was renewed by Sukarno's successor General Suharto in 1967. In response to the ban, Mohammad Natsir, Masyumi's chairman, founded *Dewan Dakwah* as a vehicle [to continue its legacy](#). However, the new organisation devoted itself to religious activism, and refrained from adopting a political cast to its organisation, to escape the New Order's repressive policies.

*Dewan Dakwah* was known during the 1980s and 1990s as one of the few Islamist organisations that was able to operate relatively freely in the restricted public space tightly controlled by the Suharto regime. [It was known](#) for its criticisms of 'liberal' reforms propagated by moderate Islamic thinkers like Abdurrahman Wahid and Nurcholis Madjid, and condemnations of alleged 'heresies' by Muslim minority groups.

When the Suharto regime fell and the *Reformasi*-era began in the late 1990s, the influence of *Dewan Dakwah* declined in conjunction with the rise of new Islamist groups, like FPI, Hizb ut-Tahrir Indonesia (HTI), the Muslim Brotherhood-inspired *Tarbiyah* Movement – and others which are advocating for similar conservative Islamist viewpoints.

### **Low Threat to Jokowi or Significant Voting Bloc?**

*Dewan Dakwah's* revival of the Masyumi Party is likely a move by its leader to regain the organisation's reputation as a preeminent player among the growing number of conservative Islamist groups which oppose President Jokowi. New parties or entities like New Masyumi, *Partai Ummat*, and KAMI are competing for the support of prospective followers who are sympathetic to their ideological agenda, particularly when the campaign for the 2024 general election kicks into gear in the next two years.

However, the establishment of these groups also meant that conservative Islamists are becoming more politically fragmented. If the situation holds, this could mean that despite their growing number and bolder political stances, collectively Indonesian Islamists would remain marginalised. Hence, they constitute a minimal threat during the remaining years of Jokowi's presidency.

Nonetheless, they still constitute a significant electoral voting constituency, which would certainly be sought after by any presidential aspirants during the 2024 Indonesian general election.

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