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The Role of Islam and Political Dynamics in the Run-up to the 2024 Elections in West Sumatra

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SYNOPSIS

With its homogeneous population (97.6% Muslim and 87% ethnic Minangkabau) and its conservative Islamic orientation, Indonesia's West Sumatra Province is likely to pick the presidential candidate who publicly affirms his Islamic faith.

COMMENTARY

In comparison with voter preferences in the other provinces of Indonesia – with the exception of Aceh – Islam is the factor that sways voter behaviour in the Muslim-majority province of West Sumatra. Muslims in West Sumatra are generally categorised as conservative in their Islamic orientation. Yet, theirs is a conservative Islamic orientation that incorporates local customs or *adat*, where a fusion of *adat* and Islam prevails under the philosophy of *Adat basandi Syarak, Syarak basandi Kitabullah* (ABS-ABK); *Syarak mangato, adat mamakai* (literally, custom based on Syariah, Syariah based on Qur'an; Syariah says, customary law will follow). In such a context, Islam becomes the standard of values, daily life and the people's voting behaviour.

Local politicians and political parties – both Islamic political parties and nationalist/secular/pluralistic parties – in West Sumatra have adjusted to this political reality. In local elections (*pilkada*), candidates – regardless of their party affiliation – generally apply similar campaign strategies: using religious symbols, appealing to religious sentiments and issues, approaching religious figures (*tokoh agama*), and supporting Muslim political aspirations and agendas.

As in the past, the Islamic factor will influence the 2024 general and presidential elections in West Sumatra. What is the role and influence of Islam in the upcoming elections, how have the presidential candidates tried to attract the support of Muslim voters in West Sumatra, and who benefits the most from this religious dynamic?



The West Sumatra Governor's Office. Given the conservative Islamic orientation of the Muslim-majority in West Sumatra, the Islamic factor will sway voter behaviour and influence the 2024 general and presidential elections in the province. *Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

Muslim Voters: From Party to Person

The influence of Islam on elections in West Sumatra can be traced back to Indonesia's first general election in 1955. In that election, three Islamic parties, Masjumi, the Islamic Party PERTI (PI PERTI) and the Indonesian Tharekat Association Party (PPTT), obtained 80.3% of the votes in West Sumatra. Together with the Indonesian Communist Party (Partai Komunis Indonesia, PKI) – which received 5.8% of the vote – they were the largest parties in the 1955 general election in West Sumatra.

During Suharto's New Order era, the United Development Party (Partai Persatuan Pembangunan, PPP), a state-directed merger of parties representing Muslim interests, always finished in second place behind the government party (Golkar). The average PPP vote share during this period was 24.4%, placing it far ahead of the Indonesian Democratic Party (Partai Demokrasi Indonesia, PDI) (1.2%), a party that represented nationalist/pluralist-oriented voters.

In the reform era, there seems to have been a shift in voter behaviour in West Sumatra, from previously choosing candidates based on party orientation (Islamic or nationalist/pluralist) to a preference now based on personality. Candidates portraying piety, both in physical appearance and campaign narratives associated with "Islamic

aspirations", tend to gain larger proportions of the votes in elections. Observe the success of the Prosperous Justice Party (Partai Keadilan Sejahtera, PKS) in winning three gubernatorial elections in West Sumatra, even though the party's national vote share was well below that of the mainstream parties (Gerindra, Golkar, Democrat and the National Mandate Party, or PAN).

Among the major political parties at the national level, only the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (Partai Demokrasi Indonesia-Perjuangan, PDIP) ignores the "rules of the game" of electoral politics in West Sumatra. Unlike other mainstream parties, the ranks of its leadership and cadres are devoid of Islamic activists and its leaders are viewed as insensitive to conservative Islamic agendas. This factor, in addition to its political history as the party of Sukarno, who put down the PRRI-Permesta revolt in Sumatra in 1958, is the reason why PDIP has a minimal political footprint in West Sumatra. In the 2019 general election, the West Sumatra PDIP failed to obtain even one seat in the House of Representatives (DPR).

In contrast, PAN is filled with members and elites of Muhammadiyah, the strongest Islamic organisation in West Sumatra. As for the Golkar Party of West Sumatra, it is known to have a close relationship with Persatuan Tarbiyah Islamiyah (PERTI), an Islamic organisation that has long existed in West Sumatra. Both are major supporters of Islamist agendas promoted by the new Islamic movements, such as Syariah-style bylaws (*Perda Syariah*), and have recently shown their support for the idea of "Shari'atising" West Sumatra's regional development bank (BPD).

Alongside "traditional" Islamic organisations such as Muhammadiyah, PERTI and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Indonesia's largest mass Islamic organisations, as well as *tariqah* (Sufi order) groups (Satariyah and Naqsabandiyah), new Islamic movements have begun to influence the political dynamics of West Sumatra. As Islamist movements that aim to formalise Syariah in West Sumatra, some of their members join political parties, run for parliament and actively support political parties and local politicians whose political narratives are in line with Islamist agendas. Conversely, politicians and political parties need the support of such Islamist movements as a shortcut to mobilise Muslim voters to vote for their candidates.

Let's take Ustadz Jelita Donal (widely known as Ustadz Jel Fathullah), the chairman of GNPF-Ulama (National Movement to Safeguard Fatwas–Ulama) West Sumatra, as an illustration. Ustadz Jel is running for election to the parliament's Regional Representative Council (Dewan Perwakilan Daerah, DPD) from West Sumatra. Ustadz Jel is also a Muhammadiyah cadre and therefore has the support of the Islamic organisation. In the 2020 West Sumatran gubernatorial election, Ustadz Jel publicly declared his support for candidate Nasrul Abit, with the proviso that if Nasrul was elected he should "provide grants to religious organisations, improve the quality of mosques and strengthen *pesantrens* [Islamic boarding schools]".

Which Presidential Candidate Will Benefit?

Ahead of the 2024 general and presidential elections, the three presidential candidate pairs (Anies Baswedan–Muhaimin Iskandar, Prabowo Subianto–Gibran Rakabuming, and Ganjar Pranowo–Mahfud MD) appear to be implementing similar campaign strategies. They visit Islamic schools/*pesantren* or the graves of charismatic *ulama*

(Islamic religious scholars) and hold meetings with *tokoh adat* (traditional leaders) and religious leaders, who then declare support for their preferred candidate. Last year, for example, Anies made a pilgrimage to the grave of Syech Burhanudin Ulakan, a Sufi scholar from the famous Shatariyah *tariqah* in Pariaman Regency. Prabowo's campaign team visited an NU *pesantren* in Dharmasraya Regency, and a group of *ulama* and *tokoh adat* declared their support for Ganjar.

Given West Sumatra's homogeneous population (97.6% Muslim and 87% ethnic Minangkabau) and its conservative Islamic orientation, the team of Anies–Muhaimin has great potential to win the presidential election in the province. Compared with the other two presidential candidates, Anies is seen as a more pious figure and one who favours conservative Islamic aspirations and agendas. On the other hand, Prabowo and Ganjar are now seen as presidential candidates endorsed by President Joko Widodo (“Jokowi”) and PDIP, respectively. Although Jokowi's administration in 2022 passed Law No. 17 on the Province of West Sumatra, providing legal recognition of the ABS-ABK philosophy, both the president and PDIP remain unpopular with voters in West Sumatra.

Ganjar is likely to gain votes from ethnic minorities (Javanese, Batak, Nias and Mentawai) and non-Muslims in Dharmasraya, West Pasaman and Mentawai districts. Given that there are two vice-presidential candidates, Mahfud MD and Muhaimin, who are affiliated with NU, both will compete fiercely for votes from NU's support base in Padang Pariaman Regency and Agam Regency. However, the political influence of NU in West Sumatra is insignificant. Unlike in Java, *pesantren* in West Sumatra are dominated by PERTI and Muhammadiyah.

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