



Political Islam in Indonesia during Prabowo Subianto's Presidency

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Executive Summary

Political Islam in Indonesia underwent a major shift at the beginning of Prabowo Subianto's presidency. During the 2010s, it was characterised by fierce competition between multiple Islamic parties and groups, and by ideological and political polarisation. However, by 2025, these had given way to a new period where major Islamic organisations and parties – represented by Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Muhammadiyah, and the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) – all have become members of Prabowo's large political coalition.

This report analyses why these three groups have decided to align themselves with the new administration. It finds that while NU has a long history of aligning itself with whichever president is in power, Muhammadiyah and PKS have realised that they needed to be part of the Prabowo administration to protect their institutional interests and gain access to state resources in order to retain their influence as a religious organisation and a political party, respectively.

Introduction

Political Islam in Indonesia has undergone several major shifts over the past few decades. During the 1980s, mainstream political Islam – represented by Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, the two largest Islamic organisations in the country – shifted from being ideologically conservative organisations into moderate Islamic organisations.

The leaders of both organisations at that time, Abdurrahman Wahid (NU) and Amien Rais (Muhammadiyah), became leading critics of the government during the Soeharto presidency and served as opposition leaders during the 1997/1998 Reformasi movement. In the post-Reformasi period, Wahid was elected as Indonesia's president (1999–2001), while Rais was elected as speaker of the People's Consultative Assembly. Both leaders inspired a generation of young activists within NU and Muhammadiyah to promote moderate and inclusivist Islam domestically and on the global stage.¹ Many of these activists entered Indonesian politics in large numbers during the post-Reformasi period.²

However, from 2000 onwards, both NU and Muhammadiyah began facing increasing competition from newer and more conservative Islamic groups, which were now able to express themselves more freely and with less restrictions from the state.³ New Islamist movements included the *Tarbiyah* ("religious nurturing") movement, the parent organisation of the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS), and dozens of other movements, especially ones with Salafi orientations.⁴

The increasing religious competition faced by NU and Muhammadiyah from these new Islamic movements began to change the Islamic discourse in Indonesia from 2005 until approximately 2019. The discourse shifted from moderate pluralist to increasingly conservative outlooks and worldviews. This period was also marked by increasing religious and political polarisation among organisations and activists with Islamist theological leanings who sought to distinguish themselves from their more moderate counterparts like NU and Muhammadiyah. All of these groups were at the time competing intensely for followers, access to mosques and religious schools, and, most importantly, the authority to speak for Islam in Indonesia.⁵

In October 2024, when President Prabowo Subianto announced his new cabinet, multiple ministerial and deputy ministerial positions were occupied by clerics and politicians with NU and Muhammadiyah backgrounds.⁶ PKS-affiliated politicians

¹ Marcus Mietzner, *Military Politics, Islam, and the State in Indonesia: From Turbulent Transition to Democratic Consolidation* (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008).

² Robin Bush, *Nahdlatul Ulama and the Struggle for Power within Islam and Politics in Indonesia* (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009)

³ Alexander R. Arifianto, "The State of Political Islam in Indonesia: The Historical Antecedent and Future Prospects", *Asia Policy* 15, no. 4 (2020): 111–132.

⁴ Alexander R. Arifianto, "The State of Political Islam in Indonesia."

⁵ Alexander R. Arifianto, "Rising Islamism and the Struggle for Islamic Authority in Post-Reformasi Indonesia", *TRaNS: Trans-Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia*, 8, no. 1 (2019): 37–50, doi:10.1017/trn.2019.10

⁶ Alexander R. Arifianto and Aisah Putri Budiarti, "Prabowo's Inclusive Cabinet: Accommodating Indonesia's Islamic Faction for Political Cohesion", *IDSS Paper*, 30 October 2024, <https://rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/idss/ip24089-prabowos-inclusive-cabinet-accommodating-indonesias-islamic-factions-for-political-cohesion/>

too were represented in the new cabinet. This raises a question: why have these three Islamic organisations – which have long been rivals – now agreed to be part of the ruling “grand coalition” and pledged their loyalty to the newly elected president?

This policy report investigates recent developments and internal political dynamics within NU, Muhammadiyah and PKS, and analyses how the relationship between these organisations has evolved during the Jokowi and Prabowo regimes.

With regard to NU, the report concludes that the organisation has always sought to maintain close political relations with the government. This was true during Jokowi’s time in office and is also true during the Prabowo presidency. However, NU is fraught with internal factionalism as key senior clerics and politicians are constantly fighting each other for control of the organisation, while simultaneously seeking favours from Jokowi, and now Prabowo, for the benefit of their particular faction.

Meanwhile, Muhammadiyah and PKS decided to join the Prabowo government primarily for pragmatic reasons. Muhammadiyah fears losing access to state resources and wants to ensure favourable regulatory treatment of its various social enterprises. This concern motivates its leaders to support Prabowo and his grand coalition. On the other hand, PKS joined the coalition because of the increasing financial strain on its regular activities after being in opposition for a decade.

NU: Strong Political Alignment, yet Internally Divided

The largest Islamic organisation in Indonesia, with approximately 90 million followers, NU has long been involved in Indonesian politics. Formed by a group of traditionalist⁷ clerics who came together under common family and lineage ties, NU has been plagued by internal rivalries and factionalism from the time it was founded in 1926. These internal conflicts were evident during the 2024 Indonesian presidential election as NU officials competed with one another to lead the organisation while also aligning themselves with their preferred presidential candidates.⁸

During the 1980s and 1990s, under the leadership of NU’s long-term leader Abdurrahman Wahid, the organisation abandoned its conservative Islamist theology and shifted towards a moderate and inclusivist orientation that also emphasised loyalty to the Indonesian state. The organisation became a leading religious civil society organisation and frequently raised criticisms and concerns about the Soeharto

⁷ *Traditional Islam*, in the Indonesian context, refers to Islam as interpreted by the association of Islamic clerics, who project themselves and their institutions (Islamic boarding schools or *pesantren*) as centres of religious authority for Indonesian Muslims. At the same time, traditional Islam is syncretic in that it blends local religious traditions (e.g., honouring local saints and shrines, holding communal prayers for deceased relatives, etc.) with teachings of the Islamic sacred texts – the Qur’an and its interpretations by the early Islamic jurists (collectively known in Indonesia as “yellow books” (*kitab kuning*)). This is in contrast to *reformist (or modernist) Islam*, which is centred on the belief that individual Muslims can interpret the religious texts and teachings on their own. Reformist Islam seeks to purify Islam by ridding it of the syncretic rituals practised by the traditionalists. NU is the largest traditional Islamic organisation in Indonesia, while Muhammadiyah and PKS are the largest reformist organisations. For further information see Howard Federspiel, “The Muhammadiyah: A Study of an Orthodox Islamic Movement in Indonesia”, *Indonesia* 10 (October 1970): 57–79.

⁸ Ahalla Tsauro and Fakhridho Susilo, “NU Factionalism on Show after Anies-Muhaimin Surprise”, *New Mandala*, 12 September 2023, <https://www.newmandala.org/nu-factionalism-on-show-after-anies-muhaimin-surprise/>.

presidency, particularly during the 1990s.⁹ Wahid's leadership during this turbulent and transformative period led to his election as Indonesia's first post-Reformasi president (1999–2001). He also inspired a generation of NU cadres who became activists and politicians affiliated with the National Awakening Party (PKB), which is quasi-affiliated with NU.¹⁰

After the 2016/17 Defending Islam rallies – the largest public protest in Indonesia, which successfully removed former Jakarta governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (“Ahok”) from power – the Jokowi administration developed a close alliance with NU in order to tackle the challenge of more conservative rivals like the PKS, the militant Front Pembela Islam (Islamic Defenders Front, FPI), and the Salafis. The state tasked organisations linked to NU such as Ansor – its youth wing – to initiate crackdowns against conservative clerics and activists with the aim of dislodging them from the public sphere.¹¹ In return for their assistance, the Jokowi administration encouraged Ma'ruf Amin, a senior NU cleric, to run for the vice-presidency during Jokowi's second presidential campaign and bestowed NU with half a dozen cabinet appointments, including ministerial portfolios such as Religious Affairs; Manpower; and Rural and Village Development.¹²

In December 2021, Yahya Cholil Staquf became the new NU chair. He is the elder brother of Yaqut Cholil Qomas, the then religious affairs minister and the former head of Ansor. During Yaqut's time leading Ansor, the organisation assisted the Jokowi administration in counteracting conservative Islamist groups and preachers. This effectively curbed the influence of emerging Islamist preachers such as Ustadz Abdul Somad and Hanan Attaki and prevented them from challenging the dominance of mainstream Islamic groups like NU within the Indonesian Muslim community.¹³

Yahya, for his part, restructured NU's programmes so that they were more in line with the Jokowi's administration priorities. Consequently, under his leadership, NU was even more dependent on the president's support and patronage compared to the time it was led by his predecessors.¹⁴ At the same time, Yahya and Yaqut were willing to exclude other NU factions from key leadership positions within the organisation. These included the faction led by PKB chair Muhaimin Iskandar, who became dominant within NU thanks to his access to political positions obtained through his tenure as PKB leader, a post he has held since 2005.¹⁵

⁹ See, for example, Bush, *Nahdlatul Ulama and the Struggle for Power*; Greg Barton, *Gus Dur: The Authorised Biography of Abdurrahman Wahid* (Jakarta: Equinox Publishing, 2002).

¹⁰ Bush, *Nahdlatul Ulama and the Struggle for Power*

¹¹ Marcus Mietzner and Burhanuddin Muhtadi, “The Myth of Pluralism: Nahdlatul Ulama and the Politics of Religious Tolerance in Indonesia”, *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 42, no. 3 (April 2020): 58–84, <https://doi.org/10.1355/cs42-1c>.

¹² Alexander R. Arifianto, “From Ideological to Political Sectarianism: Nahdlatul Ulama, Muhammadiyah, and the State in Indonesia”, *Religion, State, and Society* 49, no. 2 (2021): 126–141, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09637494.2021.1902247>

¹³ Yuka Kayane, “The Populism of Islamic Preachers in Indonesia's 2019 Presidential Election”, *The Muslim World*, 110 (Autumn 2020): 605–624, <https://doi.org/10.1111/muwo.12368>

¹⁴ Rendy Pahrudin Wadipalapa and Aisah Putri Budiarti, “The Rise of Religious Brokerage: Nahdlatul Ulama in Indonesia's 2024 Presidential Elections”, *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 47, no. 1 (April 2025): 67–93, <https://doi.org/10.1355/cs47-1c>.

¹⁵ Tsauro and Susilo, “NU Factionalism on Show.”

During the 2024 elections, the factions led by the Cholil brothers and Muhaimin competed with one another for Jokowi's support and for leadership of NU. While he claimed to be a presidential loyalist during Jokowi's two terms in office, the politically pragmatic Muhaimin manoeuvred himself into being appointed Anies Baswedan's vice-presidential nominee during the 2024 campaign.¹⁶ While the Anies–Muhaimin pair lost, PKB managed to win a record 68 seats in parliament, 10 more than the number it held during the previous parliament.¹⁷ This achievement is evidence of PKB's appeal among voters in a highly competitive political environment.

After losing the vice-presidency, Muhaimin quickly switched sides to back Prabowo. Seeing that Muhaimin was vulnerable after the presidential election, in August 2024 Yahya and his brother Yaqut mobilised their faction within NU to move against him. NU clerics and activists loyal to the brothers began a campaign to call for an alternative national congress (*muktamar tandingan*) within PKB to oust Muhaimin as party chair.¹⁸ The escalating quarrel between the two factions only ended when former vice-president Ma'ruf Amin decided to endorse Muhaimin's re-election as PKB chair in September 2024. Afterwards, the rivalry between the two factions subsided.

Nonetheless, Muhaimin's decision to align himself and PKB with Prabowo paid off when the president bestowed three ministerial positions and one deputy ministership to PKB, including one for Muhaimin as coordinating minister for community development.¹⁹ At the same time, Prabowo seemed inclined to provide less favourable treatment to the Cholil brothers than they received from Jokowi. Yaqut was not reappointed as minister of religious affairs. Instead, he was replaced by Nasaruddin Umar, a prominent NU cleric who is not aligned with either of the two factions.²⁰ Hence, it seems that the political influence of the Cholil brothers under the Prabowo presidency is declining, especially compared to their closeness with Jokowi.²¹

Nonetheless, efforts by Muhaimin to organise a *muktamar tandingan* as a venue to replace Yahya as NU's chairperson have been discouraged by other leaders of the organisation. They were also discouraged by Yenny Wahid, Abdurrahman Wahid's daughter, who was removed from PKB in 2008.²² Taken together this suggests that both Muhaimin and the Cholil brothers – irrespective of their ongoing rivalry within NU – are now publicly aligned with Prabowo. Whether this uneasy balance will last throughout Prabowo's first term remains to be seen.

¹⁶ Tsauro and Susilo, "NU Factionalism on Show."

¹⁷ Alexander R. Arifianto and Virdika Rizky Utama, "Understanding PKB-PBNU Conflict: Power Struggle and Identity Crisis", *IDSS Paper*, 10 September 2024, <https://rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/idss/ip24072-understanding-pkb-pbnu-conflict-power-struggle-and-identity-crisis/>

¹⁸ "Sebanyak 15,000 Banser jatim akan hadir pada Apel Kesetiaan PBNU di Bali", *Antaranews.com*, 23 August 2024, <https://jatim.antaranews.com/berita/814291/sebanyak-15000-banser-jatim-akan-hadir-pada-apel-kesetiaan-pbnu-di-bali?>

¹⁹ Arifianto and Budiarti, "Prabowo's Inclusive Cabinet."

²⁰ "Diprediksi jadi menag yang baru, berikut perjalanan karir Prof Nasaruddin Umar, *Republika*, 15 October 2024, <https://khazanah.republika.co.id/berita/sle0ss483/diprediksi-jadi-menag-yang-baru-berikut-perjalanan-karier-prof-nasaruddin-umar>

²¹ Wadipalapa and Budiarti, "The Rise of Religious Brokerage."

²² "Yenny Wahid sebut wacana muktamar luar biasa NU upaya pecah belah", *CNN Indonesia*, 22 December 2024, <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20241222145244-32-1179998/yenny-wahid-sebut-wacana-muktamar-luar-biasa-nu-upaya-pecah-belah>

Muhammadiyah: From Critic to Coalition Partner

Muhammadiyah, Indonesia's second largest Islamic organisation, received only one cabinet position during most of Jokowi's presidency (for Muhadjir Effendy as coordinating minister for human development and cultural affairs).²³ During Jokowi's two terms in office, Muhammadiyah leaders and activists often took an adversarial stand against his policies and legislative agenda – including the 2019 law amending the Corruption Eradication Commission, 2020 Omnibus Law on Job Creation, and 2023 Law on the Criminal Code.²⁴

However, towards the end of the Jokowi presidency Muhammadiyah began to pivot towards more accommodative relations with the president and his designated successor, Prabowo. This is because after being largely excluded from the cabinet and other senior political appointments during Jokowi's presidency,²⁵ Muhammadiyah leaders wanted to be part of Prabowo's coalition so they would be in line for cabinet and other political appointments. Their hope was based on Prabowo's close relations with Muhammadiyah and other reformist-leaning organisations, both during his previous career as a military officer and during his 2014 and 2019 presidential campaigns.²⁶

During the presidential campaign season (November 2023–February 2024), Muhammadiyah lobbied the candidates, especially Prabowo and former Jakarta governor Anies, for cabinet minister positions in exchange for support.²⁷ After Prabowo won the election and announced his cabinet in October 2024, Muhammadiyah was given several ministerial positions. Muhammadiyah's secretary general, Abdul Mu'ti, was appointed as minister of primary and secondary education, while Raja Juli Antoni, former chair of the Muhammadiyah University Students Association and a vice chair of the Indonesian Solidarity Party, received appointment as forestry minister.²⁸

When Prabowo decided to replace Satryo Bambang Brodjonegoro as minister of higher education, science, and technology, he appointed Brian Yulianto, a professor at the Bandung Institute of Technology and a Muhammadiyah member, to the position.²⁹ In addition to these three ministers, four other Muhammadiyah cadres were appointed as deputy ministers. The National Mandate Party (PAN), which is semi-affiliated with Muhammadiyah, received 6 ministerships and 2 deputy ministerships. Altogether, Muhammadiyah and PAN-affiliated cadres now occupy 9 ministerships and 6 deputy ministerships.³⁰

²³ Alexander R. Arifianto and Aisah Putri Budiarti, "From Polarisation to Opportunism: Organised Islam and the 2024 Elections", *New Mandala*, 22 January 2024, <https://www.newmandala.org/from-polarisation-to-opportunism-organised-islam-and-the-2024-elections/>

²⁴ Alexander R. Arifianto, "Clerics to Coal Miners: The Decline of Indonesia's Islamic Civil Society", *New Mandala*, 4 September 2024, <https://www.newmandala.org/clerics-to-coal-miners-the-decline-of-indonesias-islamic-civil-society/>.

²⁵ Syafiq Hasyim, "Joko Widodo, Prabowo, and the Nahdlatul Ulama", *Fulcrum*, 27 February 2025, <https://fulcrum.sg/joko-widodo-prabowo-and-nahdlatul-ulama/>

²⁶ Arifianto, "Clerics to Coal Miners."

²⁷ Arifianto and Budiarti, "Prabowo's Inclusive Cabinet."

²⁸ Arifianto and Budiarti, "Prabowo's Inclusive Cabinet."

²⁹ "Profile: Brian Yulianto, Habibie Prize Winner to Higher Ed Minister, *Antaranews.com*, 19 February 2025, <https://en.antaranews.com/news/345565/profile-brian-yulianto-habibie-prize-winner-to-higher-ed-minister>

³⁰ Arifianto and Budiarti, "Prabowo's Inclusive Cabinet."

There are several reasons why Muhammadiyah has sought to be included in Prabowo's cabinet. One is that Muhammadiyah wants to level the playing field with its competitors – particularly NU – which for the last decade has been able to secure more political and financial support from the state by aligning with the Jokowi administration. Another reason is that the organisation wants to ensure its social enterprises (*amal usaha*), which serve large numbers of citizens throughout Indonesia, will not encounter cumbersome bureaucratic red tape when dealing with various ministries and agencies. The organisation's social enterprise initiatives require close cooperation with the state bureaucracy that regulates them, particularly in the education and health sectors. Having ministers and deputy ministers with Muhammadiyah backgrounds in these sectors is part of the organisation's strategy to safeguard its *amal usaha* institutions.³¹

Lastly, Muhammadiyah's decision to accept ministerial appointments is in line with its overall willingness to enjoy the benefits of closeness to the state, as evidenced by Muhammadiyah receiving coal mining concessions from the Jokowi administration in July 2024.³²

To conclude, Muhammadiyah's openness to accepting political appointments and state patronage is grounded in the belief that by doing so, the organisation will have a seat at the highest decision-making table and place it on more equal footing with its main rival, NU. It also ensures that its concerns related to Islamic and educational affairs are part of the Prabowo administration's agenda.

PKS: From Opposition to Coalition Partner

PKS was founded in 1998 as the party of the "Religious Nurturing" (*Jemaah Tarbiyah*) community, an Indonesian Islamist movement inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood ideology. The movement grew in the 1980s at student-run mosques in major state universities like the Bandung Institute of Technology (ITB), Bogor Institute of Agriculture (IPB), and University of Indonesia in Depok, West Java. The first generation of the party's leaders were engineers and university lecturers who had attended universities in the Middle East and Malaysia, where they became attracted by Muslim Brotherhood teachings and then formed *Jemaah Tarbiyah* upon their return to Indonesia.³³

Between 1999 and 2019, PKS achieved modest electoral success in national and regional legislative races, running as a conservative Islamist party, which also advocated for anti-corruption reforms. On average, the party won about 8% of total votes cast in national legislative elections during this period.³⁴ This electoral success

³¹ Alexander R. Arifianto, "From 'High' to 'Normal' Politics: Muhammadiyah and the Prabowo Presidency", *IDSS Paper*, 9 January 2025, <https://rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/idss/ip25002-from-high-to-normal-politics-muhammadiyah-and-the-prabowo-presidency/>

³² Alexander R. Arifianto, "Clerics to Coal Miners."

³³ Yon Machmudi, "The PKS and Tarbiyah Movement: Its Agenda and Future in Indonesia", in *Rising Islamic Conservatism in Indonesia: Islamic Groups and Identity Politics*, eds. Leonard C. Sebastian, Syafiq Hasyim, and Alexander R. Arifianto (Routledge, 2021), pp. 163–180.

³⁴ Jung Hoon Park, "Stuck in Place? Normalization and the Changing Voter Profile of Indonesia's Islamist Prosperous Justice Party", *Journal of East Asian Studies*, 21, no. 3 (November 2021): 449–475.

came primarily from the party's main constituency of urban-based, university-educated, ideologically conservative voters who are fiercely loyal to the party and its platform.

However, PKS was never able to reach more than 9% of total votes in national legislative elections. This indicates that the party's conservative ideology may have reached its limit among Indonesia's largely moderate Islamic voters. Gradually the party has shifted its political ideology away from the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood and towards one that is closer to the traditional Islamic ideology predominant among the majority of Indonesian Muslims, especially in the island of Java.³⁵ This shift has occurred because PKS politicians wish to compete with moderate Islamic parties like the NU-affiliated PKB, which has more ideological and sociocultural affinities with traditionalist Islamic voters.

Nonetheless, apart from modest gains in urban cities like Surabaya and Malang, so far PKS has not been successful in making inroads in traditionalist-dominated provinces like Central and East Java. In addition, its move towards a more moderate ideological platform is facing resistance from its rank-and-file, who resist the party leadership's efforts to water down its conservative political ideology and make itself more appealing to moderate voters.³⁶

Having supported Prabowo's presidential bid twice – in 2014 and 2019 – PKS decided to back Anies' presidential bid in 2024. PKS and its cadres' support for Anies endured even as the party was relegated to junior partner status after the PKB, chaired by Anies' vice-presidential running mate, and the National Democrat (Nasdem) Party joined his coalition. However, after Anies lost the presidential election, PKS decided not to support his attempt to be re-elected as governor of Jakarta. While PKS had initially supported Anies' bid for the Jakarta governorship, it decided to withdraw this endorsement when it agreed to join the Prabowo coalition in September 2024.³⁷

PKS decided to join Prabowo's governing coalition because it had spent the previous decade during Jokowi's presidency in opposition. During those years, it had become more difficult for the party to maintain sufficient financial resources to keep itself running, particularly during the 2019 and 2024 general elections. After the 2024 presidential race ended, the party barely had adequate funds to run its daily operations. This has left PKS no choice but to become more politically pragmatic by joining the Prabowo coalition to gain political appointments as ministers and senior officials.

Nonetheless, many within the Jokowi and Prabowo camps are still distrustful of PKS and its decision to join Prabowo's coalition. Hence, they stipulated that PKS ministers must be cadres with "professional" backgrounds instead of cadres from the

³⁵ Machmudi, "The PKS and Tarbiyah Movement."

³⁶ Alexander R. Arifianto, "PKS Electoral Setbacks in the Indonesian Regional Elections: Pragmatism at the Cost of Losing Core Constituencies", *IDSS Paper*, 12 December 2024, <https://rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/idss/ip24104-pks-electoral-setbacks-in-the-indonesian-regional-elections-pragmatism-at-the-cost-of-losing-core-constituencies/>

³⁷ "Perjalanan Anies bersama PKS, Nasdem, dan PKB yang buntu di pilkada Jakarta," *Liputan6.com*, 20 August 2024, <https://www.liputan6.com/news/read/5677898/perjalanan-anies-bersama-pks-nasdem-pkb-yang-buntu-di-pilkada-jakarta>

party's political ranks. So far, only one minister in the cabinet, Minister of Manpower Yassierli, is a PKS member.³⁸

Policy Implications

Political Islam in Indonesia during much of the 2010s was highlighted by fierce competition between multiple Islamic parties and groups, and by ideological and political polarisation, both among these groups and between them and Muslim minorities. This competition has both old and new dimensions. On the one hand, it is a continuation of the rivalry between Islamic traditionalists – largely represented by NU – and reformists – largely represented by Muhammadiyah – which dates back to the founding of these organisations in the early 20th century. The rivalry between NU and Muhammadiyah has flared up periodically as the two organisations competed for political appointments and other favours from the state in different periods of Indonesian history.

On the other hand, such rivalries have become multidimensional as newer Islamist organisations – including the Tarbiyah movement, parent organisation of PKS – started to gain followers from the late 1990s onwards. These organisations are challenging NU and Muhammadiyah's authority over the interpretation of Islam in Indonesia. Thus, polarisation among the Islamic organisations increased during the 2000s and 2010s owing to their different ideological and political inclinations.

However, by the 2020s, the fierce competition between the groups had given way to a new era where all major Islamic groups – by choice or by necessity – have become members of the current administration's large governing coalition. This is the case for groups that have a pluralist, traditionalist ideological outlook (NU), moderate reformist outlook (Muhammadiyah), and conservative Islamist outlook (PKS).

The question is: why have all of these groups, despite their past rivalries and ideological and political differences, decided to now be part of Prabowo's coalition government?

The answer is twofold. First, the power of the Indonesian state increased substantially in the aftermath of the 2016/17 Defending Islam rallies. This has caused Islamist-leaning groups like PKS, long known for their frequent criticisms of state policies, to tone down their comments and look for means to develop cooperation with the state instead of challenging its authority.

Second, the state has enhanced its authority to dispense political appointments and state resources through the creation of new agencies like the Halal Product Assurance Organising Agency that provide important public services to the Indonesian Islamic community regardless of their sociopolitical affiliations. Over time, Islamic organisations that were not part of Jokowi's coalition – like Muhammadiyah and PKS – realised that they needed to be part of his successor's coalition to gain access to these appointments and resources, which would help them retain their relevance as prominent organisations within the Indonesian Islamic community.

³⁸ Arifianto and Budiarti, "Prabowo's Inclusive Cabinet."

NU's decision to align itself with Jokowi, and then with the Prabowo administration, is not surprising. Its moderate, pro-state theological outlook makes it more likely to develop common ideological and political interests with any administration. In addition, as both the Indonesian state and NU face the threats of resurging conservative Islamism, both see each other as natural allies in their effort to contain Islamists and promote moderate Islam.

While Muhammadiyah often criticised some of Jokowi's policies during his presidency, it too is facing up to the reality that its competitors, particularly NU, have received more favours from the state after they aligned closely with the administration. Given that Muhammadiyah's social enterprises are subjected to supervision by state regulatory authorities, the organisation's leaders feel they need to be included in the Prabowo cabinet in order to ensure that these enterprises do not encounter undue regulatory hurdles. Muhammadiyah clerics and politicians who hold positions in the new cabinet have mostly been assigned to the Primary and Secondary Education and Higher Education ministries, which regulate social enterprises in the education sector.

Lastly, PKS decided to join Prabowo's cabinet because the party is running out of financial resources after being in opposition for much of the past decade. It also faces an internal ideological struggle between its politicians and cadres – that is, whether it should moderate its ideology or keep its conservative outlook. In any case, given the limits of its appeal among the ranks of Indonesian Muslim voters, PKS' future role in the Indonesian Muslim community is likely to remain marginal, especially in comparison to the influence of NU and Muhammadiyah.

Has political contention and rivalry among Indonesian Islamic parties and organisations been relegated to the past in favour of political pragmatism and will it remain so for the remainder of the Prabowo presidency? The answer rests on how his administration manages to accommodate each member of its coalition, including Islamic parties and organisations.

Prabowo needs to accommodate their demands for political appointments and other state favours. At the same time, he needs to respond well to the various dynamics within these organisations – including factionalism, infighting, and leadership challenges – as these might affect whether organisations like NU, Muhammadiyah and PKS will continue to retain their allegiance to him or will distance themselves from his coalition and presidency. This is particularly important as NU heads towards its next national leadership election (*muktamar*) in 2026, while Muhammadiyah will have its next *muktamar* in 2027. A *muktamar* usually provides an opportunity for different factions to compete for an organisation's leadership. If the administration fails to accommodate the winning faction, it runs the risk of the faction's leader re-evaluating the organisation's relations with the Indonesian state.

If Prabowo is able to manage the internal dynamics within these organisations and is also able to accommodate their demands for state patronage, he will retain the political cohesion among these various groups – and prevent rivalries and polarisation among them from re-emerging later. However, if he is not able to manage these dynamics well, new challenges to his presidency may emerge in the future.

About the Author



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