

The "Conservative Turn" in Indonesian Islam

Implications for the 2019 Presidential Elections



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Executive Summary

During the campaign for the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial elections, thousands of Muslims gathered in massive demonstrations against Ahok, the initial frontrunner and a candidate from a minority ethnicity and religion, accusing him of blasphemy. Many observers have looked at the unprecedented size of the anti-Ahok rallies and their electoral context as a watershed in the evolution of Indonesian Islam.

This article analyses the seismic shift in Indonesian Islam that has occurred, with moderate Islam in steep decline while conservative Islam is on the rise. It argues that radical Islam and violent extremism in Indonesia are only the tip of the iceberg—a resurgence of conservative Islamic ideology and large-scale Islamisation of Indonesian society has occurred over the nearly two-decade old Reform Era.

This conservative turn is powered by growing numbers of highly effective and nimble conservative groups and leaders that leverage on the star power of charismatic leaders and digital marketing to disseminate a conservative ideology to the millennial generation.

Ahok's downfall was in many ways a product of this conservative turn. Religion and identity politics were certainly not the only factors involved—there were genuine socioeconomic grievances with Ahok's policies—but the evidence suggests that religion played a decisive role in voting patterns. A new generation of Muslims who do not see a place for minorities in Indonesia has the potential to overturn centuries of harmonious and peaceful co-existence with dire consequences for democracy.

There has been a significant erosion of the ability of the two moderate Islamic organisations (Muhammadiyah and Nadhlatul Ulama - NU) to act as a bulwark against conservative Islam and exercise spiritual thought leadership in support of moderate Islam. As the two major forces of Islamic moderation in Indonesia, Muhammadiyah and NU should maintain their neutrality as Islamic civil societies, and should not become pseudo political parties. However, both of them also should not totally distance themselves from politics, as they could be applying an allocative politics toward all political forces, maintaining the same distance to all political forces. By holding fast to their basic foundation (*khittah*) consistently, it will become necessary for the two mass organisations to guard Indonesia's future trajectory against the temptation of conservative groups to turn the 2019

Presidential election (*Pilpres*) into an opportunity to push their religious and political agenda of shariatisation of the country.

The fact that Jokowi and Prabowo do not comprehend the dangers of how conservative discourse and agendas may lead them to be trapped in a political strategy that would lead Indonesia on a path of deepening Islamization of politics is a worrying trend.

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Introduction

On September 27, 2016, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama “Ahok”, the Governor of Jakarta, in a speech to citizens of Pulau Seribu, cited a passage of the Quran, notably verse 51 of Sura Al Maidah, which was used by some Islamic groups as an injunction for Muslims not to take Jews or Christians as their allies or leaders. The eccentric and abrasive Ahok, who was also a double Chinese-Christian minority and initially the frontrunner for the 2017 Jakarta Gubernatorial Election, was opposed by Islamic groups who believed that non-Muslims should not hold high office in Indonesia. With reference to this verse, Ahok urged residents not to be “deceived by people using the verse to deter them from choosing a non-Muslim leader.”¹ Two videos were uploaded on YouTube. A version was uploaded by the Jakarta Government to publicize his activities. Another video was uploaded by Buni Yani whose editing of the video altered the meaning of Ahok’s words.

For Ahok’s opponents, Ahok’s comments were easily repackaged as blasphemy, which constituted religious defamation according to Indonesian law. Indeed, the Secretary-General of the hardline Islamic Defenders’ Front (FPI), infamous for its violent protests and attacks against minorities since its creation in 1999, swiftly filed a police report against Ahok. Not to be outdone, the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) issued a fatwa on October 12 that confirmed Ahok had committed blasphemy. Subsequently, MUI’s fatwa led to the creation of a new movement styling itself the National Movement to Defend MUI’s Fatwa (GNPF-MUI) which included an alliance of Islamist groups.

On October 14, thousands of Muslims dressed in white chanted anti-Ahok slogans in front of City Hall. The demonstration was organised by the FPI and initiated by its charismatic leader Habieb Rizieq Shihab. The protests were not supported by the moderate Nahdlatul Ulama. Indeed, a senior NU official urged Muslims to remain calm and to forgive Ahok who had apologised for his careless remarks.² On November 4, fanned by a furious anti-Ahok social media campaign, approximately 200,000 protestors converged on Jakarta to march from the Istiqlal Mosque (the largest mosque in Southeast Asia) to the State Palace. The protest march,

1. C. A. Wijaya, “MUI Accuses Ahok of Religious Defamation”, The Jakarta Post, October 12, 2016, available at: www.thejakartapost.com [accessed August 19, 2018].

2. K. Kapoor and F. Jensen, “Hardline Muslim Groups Protest over Jakarta’s Ethnic Chinese Governor”, Reuters, October 14, 2016, available at: <https://uk.reuters.com> [accessed August 19, 2018].

now referred to as Action 411 (Aksi 411), constituted the largest mass mobilisation on Jakarta's streets since independence. Another even larger demonstration occurred on December 2 (Action 212), which was at least twice the size of Action 411.

The narrative enumerated above represented only the tip of a multi-layered and complex phenomenon that needs to be peeled back to expose its hidden layers. The first layer centered on what Ahok stood for both as an effective governor and as a candidate from a minority ethnicity and religion running for the 2017 Election. Unsurprisingly, his election was deeply embroiled in the turbulent identity politics of contemporary Indonesia. It also centered on what Ahok meant to President Jokowi - a close ally of a President that had not been responsive to the political demands of Islamists and rumored to be a possible running mate for Jokowi in 2019. Unsurprisingly, the 2017 Election was the natural battleground for the Islamists to stop Ahok's rise and obstruct Jokowi's re-election.³

The second layer, briefly alluded to above, centered on what Ahok meant to the Indonesian nation. It constituted a struggle to win the hearts and minds of the majority Muslim population by the Islamist groups such as the FPI on one side, and the two main mainstream Islamic organizations in Indonesia, Muhammadiyah and the Nadhlatul Ulama (NU), on the other. More specifically, the struggle was between the versions of Islam that each side represented and their potential political repercussions for a democratic and pluralistic Indonesian nation. Indeed, at the heart of Action 411 and 212 was the Islamists' use of mob pressure to incite the state machinery to arrest a democratically elected minority Governor so as to soothe the wounded feelings of the majority religion. It was also constituted to advance an Islamist political program that sought to change the Constitution to oblige Muslims to follow Islamic law.

These developments are a continuation of trends prevalent in the late Suharto era with the country experiencing a "conservative turn". Feillard and Madinier (2006) have indicated that since 1967, Indonesian Islam, due to political repression toward Masyumi Party whose elite leaders shifted to build a new Islamist organization Dewan Dakwah Islamiyah Indonesia (DDII), became more conservative and attentive to religious preaching and anti-Christianization activities. By linking up to the Muslim World League based in Saudi Arabia, the organization was able to send young Muslims study at Middle Eastern universities allowing exposure to transnational

3. M. Mietzner, "Fighting Illiberalism with Illiberalism: Islamist Populism and Democratic Deconsolidation in Indonesia", *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 91, No. 2, 2018, p. 270.

Islamic radical ideologies like Salafism and Wahhabism, Islamism, and knowledge about a Caliphate system. The ex-Masyumi activists’ organization has been, hence, seen as a precursor of the “conservative turn” within Indonesian Islam.⁴

During the Suharto’s administration, Hefner emphasized that Suharto had been engineering such Islamization trends through its policy of Islamic education.⁵ This top-down initiative had significant consequences in reducing the influence of *abangan* (nominal Muslims) Javanese Muslim sub-culture.⁶ Since the 1970s and 1980s, in East and Central Java, there had been a growing trend of naming Javanese Muslim children using Arabic names such as Abdullah, Ahmad, Muhammad, instead of Sukirno, Agus, Subagio and so forth.⁷ In short, since that era, there has been a profound Islamisation and Arabization taking place within Javanese Muslim society which has given birth to the rising tide of Islamic groups and organizations in the lead up of Reformasi era.

Briefly, and at the risk of gross over-simplification, the Muhammadiyah and the NU represent a strand of moderate Islam that had laid deep historical roots within Indonesia’s civil society and politics. Both organizations depict Islam in an inclusive and democratic Indonesian context where there is no imperative for an Islamic state.⁸ In contrast, the Islamists advance what is described to be a more “conservative” or pure interpretation of the *Qur’an* and *Hadith* (Sayings of the Prophet Muhammad) with the ultimate aim of creating an Islamic state in Indonesia.

In recent years, Muhammadiyah and the NU are at crossroads, between moderation and conservatism. In many critical cases, they cannot impose their organization’s policies over their followers with regard to the infiltration of conservative attitudes into the organization. In the Ahok blasphemy case, for instance, they were trapped between two contradictory

4. A. Feillard and R. Madinier, *La Fin de l’innocence ? L’Islam indonésien face à la tentation radicale de 1967 à nos jours*, Paris: Irasec/Les Indes Savantes, 2006.

5. R. W. Hefner (ed.), *Making Modern Muslims: The Politics of Islamic Education in Southeast Asian*, Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2009.

6. Taking into consideration Geertz’s thricotomy of Javanese sub-cultures, *santri* (pious Muslim), *prijajie* (aristocrat), *abangan* (nominal Muslim), Robert Hefner critically questioned where had all the *abangan* groups gone particularly in terms of their influence in the public sphere. See R. W. Hefner, “Where Have All the *abangan* Gone? Religionization and the Decline of Non-Standard Islam in Contemporary Indonesia”, in M. Picard and R. Madinier (eds.), *The Politics of Religion in Indonesia: Syncretism, Orthodoxy, and Religious Contention in Java and Bali*, London/New York: Routledge, 2011, pp. 71-91.

7. J. C. Kuipers and Askuri, “Islamization and Identity in Indonesia: The Case of Arabic Names in Java”, *Indonesia*, No. 103, Cornell University Press, April 2017, pp. 25-49.

8. D. E. Ramage. *Politics in Indonesia: Democracy, Islam and the Ideology of Tolerance*, London: Routledge, 1997, p. 43.

forces, namely, the logic of civil liberties and the fear of being tolerant towards Islamic conservatism: forbidding their members to attend the rallies, but at the same time accepting that such developments are part and parcel of Indonesian democracy. Such conditions provide the fertile ground for conservative groups to infiltrate these organizations easily and gain the backing from conservative camps embedded within. Not surprisingly, religious conservatism is now proliferating within the bodies of these two mainstream Islamic organizations.

This brings us to the third layer, which is centered on the increasingly deep and pervasive Islamisation of Indonesian society. This layer is constituted by a broad array of forces, including historical factors, globalization and the information revolution, the proliferation of Middle Eastern Islamic ideas into Indonesia, and the nimbler and more effective Islamist groups making deep inroads into mainstream Islam through a variety of platforms.

This paper argues that the deep and pervasive Islamisation of Indonesian society is an ongoing phenomenon with long-term sociopolitical consequences, one that needs to be studied on its own terms. After a brief overview of the signs of rising conservative Islam in contemporary Indonesia, the Jakarta Election of 2017 is studied to discern the effect of religious sentiments on voting patterns and chart out how religion had become politicized by the Islamist groups. As a next step, the paper examines how conservative Islam managed to raise its influence, before evaluating the status of the mainstream Islamic organizations and their responses to the rising challenge of Islamisation of Indonesian society. The paper concludes by looking at the future of moderate Islam in Indonesia ahead of the Presidential elections.

The Contours of Islam in Indonesia: A Conservative Turn

Ahok's defeat was only the latest in a long-standing contestation over the ultimate nature of Indonesia as either an Islamic nation or a multi-religious, multi-ethnic nation. Since the founding of the Republic in 1945, the drive to incorporate "the obligation to abide by Islamic law for adherents of Islam" into the Preamble of the Constitution had constituted the most primal and elementary disagreement for Indonesians. The fear that the imposition of sharia law could precipitate the breakup of the archipelagic nation remains just as palpable today.

To put the nature of the challenge into perspective, the moderate and inclusive version of Sufi Islam that had flourished alongside Javanese culture and animist beliefs from the 15th century is on steep decline today. Correspondingly, the influence of a more conservative and "scripturalist" strand of Salafi Islam associated with Wahhabism and Middle Eastern Islam is on the rise, particularly among the younger generation below 35 estimated to constitute about 50% of voters. This strand of Islam seeks to revive old Islamic practices, sees the world in halal/haram (permissible/not permissible) binaries, and is intolerant of difference.

Anecdotally the rise of conservative Islam in Indonesia is manifested by changes in the complexion of major cities. It suggests that the Islamisation project by religious conservatives had set deep roots. In cities such as Jakarta, Solo, Yogyakarta and Makassar, Islamic symbols like the hijab, burqa, bearded men with trousers above the ankles (*isbal*) have become more visible. Also evident is the construction of new mosques, Islamic centers, and the growing number of Muslim pilgrims to Mecca. In many luxurious shopping centers, the building is usually equipped with mosques or *mushallas* for the convenience of Muslim customers during prayer time.

While radical Islamists that employ violent means are its most visible manifestation, the majority of conservative Muslims practice their faith peacefully. Yet, it is also undeniable that a seismic shift in Indonesian Islam has occurred. The increasing popularity of Islamic residential housing where Muslims live in exclusive gated communities to practice

their faith⁹ is a weak signal that centuries of harmonious and peaceful coexistence between religious minorities and a moderate and inclusive Islam could be overturned, with long-term consequences for Indonesian democracy.

Already, dark clouds threaten Indonesia's future as a tolerant and plural society. A recent survey by the Centre for the Study of Islam and Society noted that more than 50% of surveyed students were intolerant of religious minorities and one-third would not oppose violence inflicted on minorities.¹⁰ The Alvara Research Center and Mata Air Foundation also surveyed professionals, bureaucrats, and millennials in 2017. A sizable minority were not supportive of democratically elected non-Muslim leaders (31.3% of civil servants and 25.9% of professionals in private and state-owned enterprises).¹¹

In addition, polling conducted by the Centre for the Study of Islam and Society (PPIM) on October 2016 indicated that 78% of Islamic teachers support sharia enactment in Indonesia and Islamist organizations with such aims.¹² Another survey by PPIM found that Islamic teachers do not want non-Muslims in positions of authority and are unwilling to grant permits for the construction of houses of worship for other religions.¹³

Since Jokowi took office in 2014, there have been more than two dozen blasphemy convictions. Indonesia's blasphemy law has been used to prosecute and imprison members of religious minorities and traditional religions. The most high-profile case this year is the imprisonment of Meiliana, for complaining to her neighbor that the local mosque's adzan (call to prayer) was too loud.¹⁴

All are based on religious legal opinions (*fatwa*) of the Indonesian Council of Ulama (MUI) chaired by a conservative Ma'ruf Amin who was appointed as the NU Chairman and President Yudhoyono's Adviser. Since 2005 several *fatwas* condemning deviant groups of Islam Ahmadis, and Shiah (Shi'ism), as well as liberalism and secularism, have been issued. The Council Chairmanship 2015-2020 allows a large number of politicians and conservative figures such as Zainut Tahid Sa'adi (former politician of

9. "Islamic Residential Areas Booming", *The Jakarta Post*, July 28, 2018.

10. F. Chan, "Hidden Fire of Intolerance among Indonesia's Young", *straitstimes.com*, November 16, 2018.

11. Mardani, "Survei Alvara: 29.6 Persen Profesional Setuju Negara Islam Diperjuangkan", October 23, 2017, available at: www.merdeka.com.

12. PPIM survey, "Guru Agama, Toleransi, dan Isu-isu Kehidupan Keagamaan Kontemporer di Indonesia was conducted in October 2016. Further information available at: www.ppim.uinjakarta.ac.id.

13. D. Darmadi, "Guru Agama Makin Tak Toleran", available at: www.tempo.co.

14. K. M. Tehusjarana, "The Meiliana Case: How a Noise Complaint Resulted in an 18-Month Jail Sentence", *The Jakarta Post*, August 23, 2018.

Islamist party PPP), Didin Hafidudin (former presidential candidate of Islamist party PKS), Teungku Zulkarnain (preacher of Jamaah Tabligh), Bahtiar Nasir (Coordinator of GNPf-MUI), Zaitun Rasmin (President of Wahdah Islamiyah and prominent figure of GNPf-MUI) to occupy strategic structural positions.¹⁵ Henceforth, given the hardline turn in the MUI, such shifts of power provide the logical explanation as to why Jokowi has opted for the choice of the conservative cleric Ma'ruf Amin as his preferred running mate in the 2019 presidential election.

Furthermore, there has been a rise in the number of militant Islamists who engage in vigilante style persecution. These Islamists use online threats, verbal harassment, and physical intimidation against individuals who express their opinions on religious matters and religious figures. For instance, Fiera Lovita, a doctor in West Sumatra, was forced to flee with her family to Jakarta after she was subjected to a barrage of threats in response to critical comments about Rizieq Syihab, the charismatic leader of the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI).¹⁶

The weight of the evidence here is therefore highly compelling. Indonesia's reputation as an example of "liberal" and "tolerant" Islam has become occluded by the rise of intolerance and an over-protectiveness towards Islam that indicate a "conservative turn" in Indonesian Islam.¹⁷ Although Islamists that struggle for an Islamic state in Indonesia have been present at the writing of the Indonesian Constitution in 1945, the phenomenon was largely contained during Suharto's New Order. For instance, Islamic forces deemed incompatible with Indonesian unity were in 1973 neutralized by being co-opted under the umbrella of the United Development Party (PPP).

With the "political effervescence" of the Reform Era, conservative Islam flourished again. After the fall of Suharto, 42 Islamic political parties and several Islamist organizations such as the Indonesian Mujahidin Council (MMI), the Laskar Jihad, Front Pembela Islam (the Islamic Defenders Front), and Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia were formed in 1998-1999. The Islamists demanded that Section 29 of the 1945 Constitution be amended so that all Indonesian Muslims respect Islamic law or Sharia law in its entirety. The attempt failed but Islamists later succeeded in the creation of more than 60 local sharia regulations in various districts and cities over a period of ten years.

15. [Indonesian Council of Ulama](#)

16. A. Harsono, "The Toxic Impact of Indonesia's Abusive Blasphemy Law", *hrw.org*, August 7, 2017.

17. M. van Bruinessen, *Contemporary Developments in Indonesian Islam Explaining the 'Conservative Turn'*, Singapore: ISEAS, 2013.

Overall, public support for Islamic political parties has been less than expected of a Muslim majority nation. For instance, in the 2014 Election, Islamic parties only netted 33% of popular votes compared to more than 50% of the votes for secular and nationalist parties. Islamic parties are seen to have very little economic credibility for voters concerned about poverty and improving education.¹⁸ Their formerly clean image was also rocked by a series of scandals. In 2013, a "Beefgate" scandal occurred when the President of the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS), Luthfi Hasan Ishaq, was convicted of bribery and money laundering for pressing the PKS-controlled agriculture ministry to increase a company's beef import quota.¹⁹

However, major nationalist parties are free to court Muslims. Golkar, PDI-P, and Democrat Party also accommodate Islamic aspirations. Indeed, the nationalist parties created Islamic organizational wings or divisions to recognize Islamic concerns. Majelis Dakwah Islamiyah (MDI) of Golkar, Baitul Muslimin (Bamusi) of PDIP and Majelis Dzikir Nurus Salam of Democrat Party stand as notable examples. Also, the growing efficiency of health and education facilities provided by the state had undercut the welfare services provided by NU and Muhammadiyah, weakening their ability to channel support for Islamic political parties.²⁰

For Indonesian watchers, the current form of the Constitution (with Pancasila) and democratic institutions remain well-entrenched. Also, a large number of *abangan* elites (moderate and syncretic Islam) remain in power and would jealously guard their privileges. However, the ground is shifting. Competition for the Muslim vote could mean that even major nationalist parties need to move to the right in order to capture conservative votes. Furthermore, the weakening of mainstream Islam and Islamist parties that are part of the system means that there are few compelling alternatives able to counteract the rise of conservative Islam. The force and power of conservative Islam was so visibly demonstrated in the anti-Ahok campaign that even the political and legal institutions were forced to give in to their demands.

18. J. Cochrane, "In a Nation of Muslims, Political Islam Is Struggling to Win Votes", *nytimes.com*, April 7, 2014.

19. J. Cochrane, "Beef-Gate Transfixes Scandal-Prone Indonesia", *nytimes.com*, May 16, 2013.

20. J. Hicks, "The Missing Link: Explaining the Political Mobilisation of Islam in Indonesia", *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, Vol. 42, No. 1, 2012, pp. 39-66.

Explaining Ahok's Defeat in the Jakarta Election

In the first round of the gubernatorial election, Ahok and his running mate received 42.9% of the votes. Voters that favored Islamic candidates split their votes between his opponents Anies Baswedan, former Minister of Education, and Agus Harimurti Yudhoyono, son of the former president. As no single candidate received a majority of the votes, the two front-runners went for a second round. Without Yudhoyono splitting the vote, Baswedan won with a comfortable margin in the second round.

Figure 1: A large proportion of votes to Yudhoyono went to Baswedan in the 2nd Round

First Round of Jakarta Election, 15 February 2017		Second Round of Jakarta Election, 19 April 2017	
Ahok	42.9%	Ahok	42.04%
Anies Baswedan	40.05%	Anies Baswedan	57.96%
Agus Harimurti Yudhoyono	17.04%	Outcome: Baswedan's Victory	
Outcome: Inconclusive			

To put it plainly, Ahok faced an unpromising political base for the Governorship from the onset due to his Chinese-Christian identity. Hardline Muslim groups such as the FPI were vocal in their opposition to non-Muslims in high office as early as 2012 when he became vice governor. His double minority status meant that a sizable proportion of the population never considered voting for him. For instance, a survey by Indikator Politik in June 2016 (7 months before the election) revealed that 27.1% of voters surveyed were satisfied with Ahok's performance as

governor, but would not vote for him. This figure had increased to 30.1% by polling day, of which 98.8% were Muslims.²¹

While the political ground for a non-Muslim candidate was highly unfavorable, Ahok also stood for effectiveness. Prior to his misstep at Pulau Seribu in September 2016, Ahok's opponents were trailing in his wake. He was polling comfortably between 45-47%. After the video went viral, his stocks had plummeted with him polling at 26%. This setback notwithstanding, by January 2017, his polling numbers were trending up—an indication that there were many voters who saw his *performance* as Governor as the defining factor in their decision to vote for him. Anecdotal evidence suggests that while taxi drivers in Jakarta did not like Ahok, they liked his way of working (*Sistem kerja Ahok*), for his flood alleviation schemes had reduced the duration required for the floodwaters to recede from a full day to several hours.

Such effectiveness was however achieved at a significant cost. In order to push through the flood alleviation schemes, slums such as Kampung Melayu, Kalijodo and Kampung Batang in North Jakarta were forcibly evicted by the use of the security apparatus. A plan to reclaim the island north of Jakarta also incited feelings of injustice, as it would threaten the livelihoods of fishermen living along the coast while the benefits of the development largely accrued to tycoon-developers and the upper classes. As a result, there was a perception that Ahok was hostile to poor people and Muslims.

Unfortunately, a challenging campaign became a mission impossible after Ahok's misstep. Ahok's speech in Pulau Seribu was manipulated to depict him as a blasphemous and anti-Islam candidate. Allegations of blasphemy stuck on Ahok which raised Anies' electability. Among Ahok's satisfied non-voters, 73.5 percent stated that they believed Ahok was guilty of blasphemy, and 12.1 percent weren't sure. For satisfied voters who ultimately did not vote for him, the fact he was not a Muslim and had blasphemised were major deal-breakers.²²

No matter how one splits it, the evidence is compelling. Ahok only received 32% of the Muslim vote, while obtaining 96% of the non-Muslim vote.²³ The religious factor proved crucial in wounding Ahok's electoral prospects in a way that issues of economic inequality, high-handed behavior, and corruption could not.

21. M. Mietzner and B. Muhtadi, "Ahok's Satisfied Non-Voters: An Anatomy", *New Mandala*, May 5, 2017.

22. *Ibid.*

23. M. Mietzner. "Fighting Illiberalism with Illiberalism: Islamist Populism and Democratic Deconsolidation in Indonesia", *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 91, No. 2, 2018, p. 272.

The Rise of “Smart Dakwah”: Conservative is the New Cool

The growing influence of Conservative Islam in Indonesian society is not a fluke. It is the result of “smart” dakwah (proselytization) employed by conservative groups, reflecting how these groups are nimbler, more resourceful, and more effective in winning the hearts and minds of Indonesian Muslims. Smart dakwah is characterized by the star power of celebrity ustads and the utilization of digital marketing to reach out to tech savvy millennials. Indeed, conservative groups are very active on YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp and other communication networks. For Indonesia, where about 50% of the population is under the age of 35, this is a powerful tactic indeed.

The story of Bachtiar Nasir (chairman of the GNPF-MUI that spearheaded the anti-Ahok campaign) is an excellent illustration of the power of smart dakwah and the careers of conservative ustads. Nasir started his early education in Gontor, an elite Islamic educational institution known for its rigorous Islamic curriculum and the mastery of foreign languages (Arabic and English). After his undergraduate studies in Saudi Arabia, he performed dakwah that combined Salafism (a conservative strand of Islam) and modernism. Reflecting the conservative infiltration, he was appointed to the Muhammadiyah Council of Religious Propagation, which gave him religious and social stature among Muslim professionals. To promote his message, Nasir uses various platforms, from Islamic study sessions for executives at a five-star hotel in Jakarta, to national television and religious lectures around Indonesia. These videos are then uploaded onto YouTube and Facebook attracting hundreds of thousands of views. Thus, digital marketing enables conservative ustads to magnify their star power and promote conservative Islam.

Also, there is no doubt that conservative Islam is the new cool in Indonesia. Prominent conservative groups have become mainstream in recent years. In the Alvara Institute’s survey of respondents’ perceptions of Islamic mass organizations, the NU, Muhammadiyah and the FPI were the three best known Islamic organizations among Indonesian professionals.²⁴

24. Z. A. Putri, “Survei Alvara Ungka Peta Pandangan Keagamaan di Kalangan Profesional”, *DetikNews*, October 23, 2017, available at: <https://news.detik.com>.

Although the FPI had a checkered history known for its violent and hardline activities against religious minorities, it has morphed into an Islamic mass organization based in Jakarta and a solid provincial and local presence. Its popularity cannot be understood without considering the larger Islamisation of Indonesian society, as its struggles against crime, immorality, and heretical religious sects such as the Ahmadis and Shiites enjoy a degree of support. The positive image of FPI also stems from its humanitarian actions after the outbreak of natural disasters.²⁵

FPI also promotes its vision and mission through the use of social media. For instance, Habib Rizieq has an account on Twitter with a follower base of 47,897 members that was started two months after Action 212. Indeed, the rally seemed to have been successful in refurbishing Habib Rizieq and the FPI's image and since then they have been portrayed as stalwart defenders of Indonesian Islam. On Youtube, the official Channel of FPI Islamic Defenders Front was followed by 31,828 subscribers, where there was a video documentary of FPI humanitarian activities helping hundreds of thousands of victims of the 2004 Aceh Tsunami. Rizieq's speeches are also shared by other conservative YouTube channels such as Serambi Aswaja (223,515 subscribers).

The rising conservatism is also characterized by the emergence of young ustads who gain popularity due to social media platforms, especially YouTube. For instance, Abdul Somad (5.3 million followers on Instagram), a 41-year old Islamic preacher, is a graduate of Cairo's famed Al Azhar University and has posted hundreds of video lectures on YouTube. He is highly photogenic and popular for his simple and relatable style, and is said to be running a full schedule as a reflection of how great popular demand for his religious lectures are. Recently, Somad was named as the most prominent religious figure for 2018 by the Indonesian newspaper *Republika*.²⁶

In that regard, Indonesian Islam is in the throes of a Darwinian battle for the survival of the fittest today. Mainstream Islam is faring poorly in this fight. To be able to compete, mainstream Islam must also be able to harness the power of smart dakwah to get out their messages to the new generation of Indonesians.

25. Source: www.youtube.com.

26. E. Damhuri, "Tokoh Perubahan Republika 2017: Ustaz Abdul Somad", *Republika*, April 6, 2018, available at: <http://nasional.republika.co.id>.

A Health Check for Mainstream Islam

For many Western observers, Ahok's electoral defeat was a momentous victory for the religious conservatives that had engineered his downfall through blasphemy allegations, racist/Islamist rhetoric, and pressure politics.²⁷ The use of mob pressure to force political and legal institutions into arresting a democratically elected governor from an ethnic and religious minority had set a dangerous precedent for Islamist groups and minorities alike.

It is important to undertake an internal analysis of mainstream Islam—Muhammadiyah and the NU that contain an estimated membership base plus affiliates of 22.46 million and 79.04 million respectively²⁸ — because not only did they fail to act as a bulwark against conservative Islamic ideology, but large numbers participated and supported the anti-Ahok rallies. The susceptibility of Muhammadiyah and the NU's base to conservative appeals had put the viability of mainstream Islam into grave doubt.

A reading of the statements and actions of both Muhammadiyah and the NU in response to the anti-Ahok rallies indicated that they were scrupulous about abiding by the letter of the law. They urged all Muslims who participated in the protest to respect the legal process and democratic norms of peaceful protest. This was because they were worried that any turmoil caused by the Ahok issue could disrupt Indonesia's fragile social fabric. Thus, they saw no reason to oppose the demonstration as long as it was conducted peacefully.

Besides that, the responses of both organizations diverged significantly. Muhammadiyah's Central Board instructed all its members and supporters to avoid displaying its banner or wearing its symbol during the protests, but declared that Ahok had committed blasphemy, thereby indirectly sanctioning its members to participate in their private capacity. On the other hand, the NU prohibited followers from attending the rallies

27. Y. Kwok, "Conservative Islam Has Scored a Disquieting Victory in Indonesia's Normally Secular Politics", *time.com*, April 20, 2017.

28. G. Ginanjar, "NU dan Muhammadiyah terdesak HTI, FPI, MUI?", *BBC News*, August 3, 2015, available at: www.bbc.com; Hasanuddin, "Menakar Jumlah Jamaah NU dan Muhammadiyah", January 19, 2017, available at: <https://hasanuddin.com>.

but refrained from weighing on the blasphemy case. Their differing responses were a timely reminder that moderate Islam did not constitute a monolithic bloc. The more modernist Muhammadiyah saw the demonstration as an exercise of civil liberties. On the other hand, the NU saw it as a demonstration manipulated by radical groups.²⁹

Nonetheless, it was clear that neither Muhammadiyah nor the NU took a principled position against the Aksi Bela Islam rallies for their strident Islamist and racist rhetoric. Their emphasis on legalistic issues and the peaceful nature of the protest even lent an air of legitimacy (at the very least, did not undermine it) to the Islamist campaign to unseat Ahok.

One key reason why Muhammadiyah and NU's members were highly susceptible to the anti-Ahok campaign was because of the stature of the GNPf-MUI's leadership. Action leaders like Amien Rais, Bachtiar Nasir, Habib Rizieq and other conservative ustads were charismatic figures that exerted significant political and religious influence. Amien Rais, as a former leader of Muhammadiyah, and Bachtiar Nasir, another leader with a Muhammadiyah background, attracted Muhammadiyah members to cross-over to the conservative coalition. Habib Rizieq Syihab was also a highly prominent conservative figure that was rooted culturally in NU's syafiite tradition. Building on a story of NU's decline, Habib Rizieq urged all NU followers to rescue the traditionalist organization from the dangers of secularism, liberalism, and Shiah (Shi'ism). These charismatic leaders were thus able to draw upon Muhammadiyah and NU's religious tradition to strengthen the anti-Ahok movement.

The mainstream Islamic organizations were also caught flat-footed by the infiltration of conservative Islamic ideology within their body politic. Hajriyanto Y. Thohari, chairman of the Muhammadiyah Central Board argued that this occurred because of the insufficient attention paid to Muslim issues and concerns within mainstream Islamic organizations. The Islamic ummah felt left behind and favored religious views more comfortable and more in line with their concerns. The conservative groups filled this gap and gained traction among urban middle class Muslims.³⁰

Hajriyanto's account corroborates observations made by commentators that these two mainstream organizations had become preoccupied with political affairs and their internal organizations, rather

29. "NU: Kebebasan Berekspresi Ditunggangi Kelompok Radikal", *Suara*, December 30, 2016, available at: <https://m.suara.com>.

30. Interview with Hajriyanto Y Thohari, in Jakarta December 2017.

than cultivating and supporting the ummah.³¹ Indeed, there had been a significant neglect of their religious fundamentals and content leading to an enervation of their religious and spiritual thought leadership. This is most evident in the crisis of relatability and relevance of Muhammadiyah and NU's religious congregations (*pengajian*). These congregations serve as vehicles for promoting moderate Islamic ideology, recruitment, and other religious initiatives, but had become monotonous in their form and content, outdated in the digital age, and out of touch with hot button topics of concern to worshippers.

Furthermore, the ease with which conservative groups infiltrate mainstream Islamic networks of pesantrens, hospitals, mosques, and universities as launch pads for promoting conservative ideology is disturbing. For instance, in 2005 a conservative teacher was dismissed from the Muhammadiyah Islamic Boarding School in Surakarta for promoting tarbiyah ideology affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood. These infiltration attempts had even led to outright subversion of their assets. For instance, 3 of NU's mosques were taken over by the PKS, a conservative Islamist political party in 2010 in the Banyuwangi regency in East Java.³²

The malaise and the hollowing out in the two mainstream organizations can be traced back to the early Reform Era when Muhammadiyah under Amien Rais established a reformist political party, the National Mandate Party (PKS), while NU chairman Abdurrahman Wahid formed the National Awakening Party (PKB) in 1998. As prominent personalities, Amien Rais' and Abdurrahman Wahid's leadership of the new political parties led to an exodus of activists and cadres to the political arena. This created a vacuum of power, and conservative groups were able to step into the breach to provide social and dakwah activities.

Indeed, conservative Islamic ideology is very pronounced among the younger generation of Muhammadiyah members today. The catchphrase "back to the Quran and Sunnah (Islamic traditions and practices)" is a common rallying call. There is a growing convergence between this conservative Muhammadiyah strain and Islamist groups. For instance, in late 2017, the Great Mosque of Yogyakarta invited Felix Shiauw, a conservative preacher in the Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia, to give a religious lecture on the "End of Year Reflection".

31. Hajriyanto said that in many cases, Islamic activists of Muhammadiyah and NU are more occupied by securing personal positions and interests than supporting ummah, such as in political parties with regard to elections or in universities affiliated to the organisations.

32. "Tiga Masjid NU di Banyuwangi Sudah Diambilalih Kelompok Lain", *NU Online*, February 19, 2007, available at: www.nu.or.id.

Compared to Muhammadiyah, NU is less susceptible to the infiltration of conservative ideology as leadership credentials are primarily based on genealogical lineage. It is extremely difficult for someone without a *kiyai* (priest) background and a *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) education to obtain a position of influence. During Abdurrahman Wahid's long tenure as Chairman, he also successfully fostered ideas of tolerance, pluralism, and even liberal ideas in the newer NU generation. However, the organization's decentralized, ulama-centric structure makes it difficult to maintain cohesion and unity, and this is doubly hard today since Said Aqil Siradj, the current NU chairman, does not come from an influential family lineage. This diminishes the organization's gravitational pull, which may make it easier for the ulamas to adopt conservative ideology.

To put it plainly, internal weaknesses have allowed conservative ideology to infiltrate into the ranks of the mainstream Islamic organizations. In addition, the charisma of conservative leaders has pushed elements of the conservative streams of mainstream Islamic groups towards convergence with the Islamists. Unsurprisingly, Muhammadiyah and NU are less able to act as a bulwark against conservative Islam nor exercise religious and spiritual thought leadership in support of moderate Islam.

Where to Next? The Future of Mainstream Islam and the 2019 Presidential Election

Islam has now become a significant driving force in contemporary Indonesian politics. In the simultaneous regional elections (*Pilkada Serentak*) in 2018, some candidates backed up by conservative Islamist groups gained significant votes, winning elections in significant electorates in North Sumatra, South Sulawesi, and East Java. In West Java despite finishing in the runner-up position (28,74%) behind Ridwan Kamil-Uu Ruzhanul Ulum (32,88%), the pair of Sudrajat-Syaikh, by playing the Islamic card, overturned the predictions of almost all Indonesian pollsters like Kompas, LSI, and IndoBarometer which posited that Sudrajat-Syaikh would finish in third position.³³ President Jokowi's selection of Kyai Ma'ruf Amin as his vice presidential running mate in the 2019 presidential election is based on similar considerations. The calculation is that a conservative NU ulama like Kyai Ma'ruf would be able to attract Muslim voters and to break up the concentration of conservative groups gravitating towards his rival Prabowo Subianto. On the other hand, although Prabowo did not follow up the first ulama recommendation (*Ijtimak Ulama I*) which nominated Salim Jufri Assegaf and Abdul Somad Batubara,³⁴ conservative groups nevertheless have continued to support Prabowo's choice of Sandiaga Saladin Uno as his running mate as he was their candidate in the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election and therefore see him as a representation of Islam during the *Ijtimak Ulama II*.³⁵ Sohibul Iman, president of the Islamist Partai Keadilan Sejahtera (PKS) has gone so far as to describe Sandiaga Uno as "Santri di era Post Islamisme" or a Millennial Santri.³⁶ The term "Santri" has long been associated with students who study at a Pesantren or religious boarding school. In appropriating the term "Santri" to legitimize Sandiaga Uno, Sohibul Iman has broadened the term to go beyond a religious school or education setting to incorporate

33. R. F. Firdaus, "5 Hasil Survei Pilgub Jabar Sepanjang Juni 2018", *Merdeka*, June 25, 2018, available at: www.merdeka.com

34. D. Nurita and S. Persada, "Ijtimak Ulama GNPF Rekomendasikan Abdul Somad Cawapres Prabowo", *Tempo*, July 29, 2018, available at: <https://nasional.tempo.co>.

35. D. A. Rachman, "Ini Isi 17 Butir Pakta Integritas GNPF yang Diteken Prabowo-Sandiaga", *Kompas*, September 16, 2018, available at: <https://nasional.kompas.com>.

36. "Presiden PKS: Sandiaga Santri Millennial", *Kompas*, August 10, 2018.

economic competency. Hence Sandiaga Uno is deemed as a post Islamic Santri, namely, a deeply religious person who combines a religious outlook with economic management.

Both Jokowi and Prabowo have utilized the Islamic card in their quest for the Islamic vote. Being born and raised in an Islamic milieu (*santri*), they both realize that sociologically speaking, they do not have adequate Islamic credentials in the midst of growing populism and Islamic conservatism. In this sociological and political context, both are required to carry out political compromises and accommodation. Blindsided by his inability to counter the 212 movements, Jokowi over the course of the last two years began to increase the intensity of his interactions with Islamic mass organizations, notably the mainstream Muhammadiyah and NU organizations. At the same time, while admitting that he was not a good Muslim (*santri*), Prabowo also claimed to have had a long and productive relationship with the Islamic community. Born and raised from a mixed family of Javanese Muslims and Manado Christians, Prabowo feels he has strong Islamic credentials having developed a close relationship to Islam and ulamas during his past presidential campaigns.³⁷

The élite political struggle to brandish such Islamic credentials indicates that Indonesian politics today remains dependent on the Islamic identity politics. The weight of Islam in the sociopolitical arena finds its political momentum whereby political accommodation and compromise with Islam is now unavoidable. At the same time, however, such a situation triggers polarization and tensions within Muslim, nationalist, and secularist groups that may undermine stability. Yet the weight of Islam also reflects the dynamics of profound Islamization that has continued in Indonesia since its arrival in the archipelago while revealing simultaneously the tension, contestation, and struggle for dominance between Islamic schools (*madzhab*) in a very plural Indonesian Islam context. Again, the presidential pairs are essentially reviving the contestation of Geertzian trichotomy of *santri* (Muslim), *priyayi* (aristocrat), and *abangan* (nominal Muslim) which has polarized Indonesians into political identity blocks in the 1950s. In the light of recent rise of conservatism, the two pairs Jokowi-Maruf and Prabowo-Sandi have provoked new deep polarization fissures between Muhammadiyah and NU and also between the more conservative versions of Islamic expression as well as contestation between nationalist and secular Indonesians.

37. D. L. Listy and R. Widiastuti, "Di Hadapan Santri, Prabowo Cerita Soal Kedekatannya dengan Kiai", *Tempo*, October 31, 2018, available at: <https://pilpres.tempo.co>.

The appointment of Kyai Ma'ruf Amin as Jokowi's running mate in the 2019 election has sparked controversy. Within Jokowi's die-hard *abangan*, secular and ethnic minority supporters, Ma'ruf is unpopular for having played a pivotal role in the incarceration of Ahok for a two-year prison term for blasphemy. His conservative track record is evident in his opinions on religious diversity and pluralism and opposition to the Ahmadiyah movement.³⁸ Ma'ruf is also now a controversial figure among Islamist and conservative groups for having crossed over into the "enemy" camp. Another issue to contend with is that Ma'ruf's nomination as vice presidential candidate has also led to contestation within and between Muhammadiyah and NU and other Islamic organizations which has manifested into deep polarization.

Segregative polarization, that started in the wake of the 2012 Jakarta election and reached its peak in the 2017 elections, has recently returned with a vengeance. Unlike the 2014 presidential election and the 2017 elections that shaped identity politics into groups with weaker Islamic credentials, communists and pawns of Chinese economic imperialism, this time the discourse of Islamic identity politics is centered on the Islamic (moderate) discourse vs Islamist discourse of sharia and caliphate. In this political landscape, the Prabowo-Sandi duo has been identified as close to Islamist-conservative political narratives whereas Jokowi-Ma'ruf, in contrast, has been considered as the bearer of a religious nationalist narrative of Wassatiyat Islam and Pancasila. As a result, political cleavages were quickly formed and solidified. In the meantime, Ahok supporters and progressive liberal Muslims who were initially disappointed with the appointment of a conservative Muslim leader like Ma'ruf Amin have now started to support Jokowi's selection. On the other hand, conservative groups who were initially disappointed with the appointment of Sandi, at the expense of Salim Jufri or Abdul Somad, are now consolidating their ranks behind the Prabowo-Sandi camp. The key ulama that support Prabowo-sandi are Muhammad Al Khaththath, Hassan Haikal, Yusuf Martak, Mardani Ali Sera, KH Abdul Rosyid and Habib Rieziq Shihab. Jokowi's support from prominent Muslim leaders comes primarily from those within the political party coalition supporting him.

The polarization constitutes a reappearance of political identity within Indonesian Islam, notably between Muhammadiyah and NU. Jokowi-Maruf would be backed up by NU members, including its liberal and progressive forces. On the contrary, most of Muhammadiyah members seem to now be leaning towards Prabowo-Sandi with Muhammadiyah

38. A. N. Burhani and D. Simandjuntak, "The Ma'ruf Amin Vice-presidential Candidacy: Enticing or Splitting Conservative Votes?", Singapore: ISEAS, September 4, 2018.

élites and activists such as Suyatno and Dahnil Simanjuntak joining the National Success Team of Prabowo-Sandi.³⁹ The fact that Jokowi's camp is dominated by NU affiliated people cannot be neglected, whereas Muhammadiyah's representation within Jokowi's camp is almost non-existent. Some Muhammadiyah élites and activists supporting Jokowi-Maruf are Hajriyanto Y Thohari, Ahmad Rofiq, and Raja Juli Anthoni in the National Success Team of Jokowi-Maruf represent their respective political parties (Partai Golkar, Perindo, and PSI) that are part of the coalition.⁴⁰

Within Muhammadiyah and other Islamic groups, there has been a growing assumption that Jokowi has paid more attention to NU than other Islamic groups. The resignation of Dien Syamsuddin as President's Special Envoy a few weeks after the appointment of Ma'ruf Amin strengthened that assumption. Moreover, in the few days following his resignation, Dien Syamsuddin welcomed Prabowo Subianto at an event that he organized in Jakarta. Furthermore, unofficial political leaning of Muhammadiyah toward Prabowo-Sandi has been indicated by Sandi's public lectures which are frequently organized in Muhammadiyah Universities. Unlike conservative groups, Muhammadiyah remains officially non-partisan. Additionally, there has also been a group of its élites and activists who are actively promoting Jokowi-Maruf among Muhammadiyah and Islamic society. They are of the opinion that the Jokowi administration has led the country on the right path of progress, prosperity, and equality. Another prominent argument being made is that Jokowi has played a significant role in maintaining harmony, integrity, diversity and unity of the Indonesian people.⁴¹

Moreover, the consolidation of conservative forces has found its momentum. The conservatives have seen that the incumbent was incapable of managing the country and keen on not only discriminating Islam and ulamas but with the promulgation of the Peraturan Pemerintah Pengganti Undang-Undang Nomor 2 Tahun 2017 tentang Organisasi Kemasyarakatan (Perpu Ormas) taken matters a step further by attempting to "criminalize" the ulama. To channel their contention, they supported Prabowo-Sandi as the best pair to address Indonesia's developmental challenges. Furthermore, if Prabowo wins the election, they see a better chance for Islamisation of the country under his administration. To help that cause,

39. B. U. Putri and S. Persada, "Tokoh Muhammadiyah di Kubu Prabowo Sandi", *Tempo*, September 26, 2018, available at: <https://nasional Tempo.co>.

40. "Daftar Lengkap Tim Pemenangan Jokowi-Ma'ruf Amin", *CNN Indonesia*, August 20, 2018, available at: www.cnnindonesia.com.

41. I. Hariyanto, "Aktivis Muda Muhammadiyah Deklarasi Dukungan ke Jokowi-Ma'ruf Amin", *DetikNews*, October 9, 2018, available at: <https://news Detik.com>.

they intend to produce Islamic discourse (fatwa) such as *al-ukhuwah al-Islamiyah* (Islamic solidarity) and *da'wah amar ma'ruf nahi munkar* to motivate all Muslims to deliver a Prabowo-Sandi's victory. They also get involved in a long run campaign by using all resources and networks they have at their disposal.

It is now widely accepted that, after *Aksi Bela Islam 212*, a religious (Islamic) conservative trend has become more apparent, as these groups constitute not just a socio-religious driving force but also a political force able to shape the country's political landscape. The Jakarta gubernatorial Election (*Pilkada*) and the 2018 Simultaneous Election (*Pilkada Serentak*) showcase such trends indicating the growing significance of their existence. In those *Pilkadas*, playing the "Islamic card" was prominently applied, although the result of *Pilkada Serentak* was not as successful for conservatives as was the case in Jakarta. In the 2019 presidential election, Jokowi's selection of a conservative Kiyai Ma'ruf Amin has prompted the conservative camp to issue a political fatwa for Prabowo-Sandi's victory.

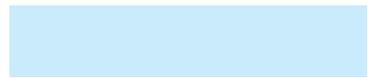
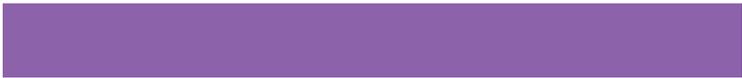
Another example is the case of a controversial burning of a flag bearing the proclamation of *tawhid* (*shahadatain*) in Garut West Java on 22 October 2018, when conservatives attempted to exploit the NU Banser's carelessness and insensitivity. Conservatives emphasized that what was burned was the flag of Rasulullah, *rayah* (white color) and *liwa'* (black color) containing the proclamation of *tawhid*. The National Board of NU and Banser challenged such an assertion arguing that what was burned was actually the flag of Hizb ut-Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) that was banned by the Indonesian government.⁴² What is interesting to note is how such situations are politically instrumentalized to undermine the Jokowi administration. By mobilising mass demonstrations in Jakarta and in some provinces and regions in Java and Sumatra, conservative groups wanted to recreate the narrative of religious blasphemy purportedly committed by members of Banser NU in an attempt to create a replay of the mass rally as well as the 212 movements.⁴³ However, that effort had its limitations and finally failed. The meeting of the Muhammadiyah and NU elite on 31 October 2018, calling all Muslims to be united and reject all provocations defused the situation and foiled attempts to politicise the case for political gain during the 2019 elections.⁴⁴

42. A. M. Selasa, "Pembakaran Bendera Tauhid di Garut Diduga karena Terkait HTI", *PikiranRakyat*, October 23, 2018, available at: www.pikiran-rakyat.com.

43. A. N. Burhani, "Aksi Bela Tauhid: Manufacturing Religious Cleavages for the 2019 Presidential Election?", *ISEAS Commentary*, November 8, 2018.

44. P. M. Surya Putra, "PBNU dan Muhammadiyah Bertemu, Hasilkan 4 Keputusan Bersama", November 1st, 2018, available at: www.liputan6.com.

The fact that Jokowi and Prabowo do not comprehend the dangers of how conservative discourse and agendas may lead them to being trapped in a political strategy that could lead Indonesia on a path of deepening Islamization of politics is a worrying trend. Elements of political conservatism exist on both sides of Jokowi and Prabowo divide, whose challenges are equally strong: Ma'ruf Amin with his conservative track record of issuing controversial fatwas is a running mate of Jokowi, while Prabowo is fully supported by Islamic political parties and conservative Islamic groups. In sum, religious conservatism is on a fast track to realising their political agenda whoever wins in the 2019 Presidential Election.



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