



The Declining Role of Islamists in Indonesian Democracy: The Success of Jokowi's government in Containing the Hardline Islamic Movements

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Abstract. Throughout the Indonesian history, Islamists has an important role in shaping political development of this world third largest democracy. This paper attempts to describe this development that has led to a significant decline in the role of Islamists in recent Indonesian political contestations. For this purpose, this article will discuss government policies throughout the history of Indonesia from Soekarno's era to Joko Widodo's administration and explain Jokowi's success in curbing the Islamist agenda. Based on collected data from researches and media publications, this paper will explain the contentions between Islamist and Nationalist political factions as well as the government strategies which eventually led to the decline role of Islamists in the Indonesian democratization struggle. The setback of Islamist politics occurred when Soekarno halted the deadlock democratic debates and issued a presidential decree leading to disbanding of Masyumi (the prominent Islamist party) and during the authoritarian Soeharto regime's anti-Islamists policies. While SBY's reformist nationalist agenda gave some rooms for the increase role of Islamist movements, Jokowi's semi-authoritarian tactics of disbanding Islamic hardline groups, led to the Islamists leaders and their discourses being subdued, resulting in the absence of Islamist discourse during 2024 elections.

Keywords: Islamists, Nationalists, Pancasila, Democracy.

1. Introduction

The Indonesian democratic challenges have been how to accommodate the appeals of its diverse political factions, with the contestations frequently dominated by two major political movements: the nationalists and the Islamists. The Islamists had important roles in Indonesian history with organizations and leaders being prominent in various political arenas. Thus, although the nationalists tend to dominate the Indonesian political landscape, there had been numerous disagreements involving the Islamists. Major contestations between the two factions started during the debates on the principles of Pancasila in 1945 and the political contestations in the 1950s, which, in a way, has continued until this day in different forms. This paper describes these contestations, how various regimes deal these tensions, and the declining role of Islamists in politics during the Jokowi's presidency. For this purpose, this paper attempts to analyze government's policies and political strategies during the regimes of Soekarno, Soeharto, Soesilo Bambang Yudoyono (SBY), and Jokowi. This paper argues that Jokowi's presidency became the most successful in curbing Islamists politics and movements.

This study is mostly based on researches, various online media publications containing discursive controversies, and government policies that affected the roles

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Islamists in the Indonesian political landscape. Consequently, this study compares each administration's policies and examine which regimes is more beneficial or more damaging to the growth of Islamists in Indonesian politics. More specifically, this article will discuss the success of Jokowi's policies in curbing the hardline Islamic organizations, discourses, and political participations. Hopefully, the discussion will provide an idea of the future of Islamist politics in Indonesia.

2. Policies And Debates: From Soekarno's Era To The Sby Presidency

Faced with the challenge of uniting the diverse Indonesian population, religious and secular nationalist leaders debated to come up with the foundations for the unity since as early as 1920s. For example, prominent nationalist, Soekarno, debated an Islamist, Mohammad Natsir on the question of whether Islamism or Nationalism should dominate the foundation of independent Jakarta [1] (Suhelmi, 2012). In his article entitled "Nationalism, Islam and Marxism," Soekarno strongly argued against Natsir's proposition that Islam is the most suitable foundation for Jakarta, emphasizing that nationalism is better [2] (Kahin, 2012a). Although the debates and controversies on this issue continues until recently, Soekarno succeeded in laying a strong foundation for nationalism which is deemed more inclusive for the unity of Jakarta [3] (Kahin, 2012b).

The strength of nationalism vis a vis Islamism was manifested in the Constitution Preparatory Committee (BPUPKI) debates on the creation Pancasila (five founding principles) on May 29, 1945, when the Islamists contended that it includes sharia law for the Muslims as the first principle. The concerns of Christians supported by moderate Muslim leaders led to the agreement that secular nationalists' more inclusive and modern views are best for the Indonesian constitution [4] (Maarif, 2006).

However, the strength of Islamists persisted after 1945 independence and Soekarno's presidency, as shown in the first Indonesian democratic election in 1955. Although the nationalist won, Islamist party, *Masyumi*, took the second place and they continued to disagree on the suitable foundation of the constitution. Never-ending debates ended up in a deadlock, leading to Soekarno's issuance of an authoritarian presidential decree in 1959, confirming the return to the nationalist 1945 constitution and guided democracy [4] (Maarif, 2006). This led to the exclusion of Islamic hardliners and the growth of moderate Islamic organizations such as NU as well as Soekarno's disbanding of *Masyumi* in 1962, followed by several Islamist rebellions.

Although Soekarno's authoritarian policies seemed to be effective in impeding hardline Islamic movements, his efforts to unite nationalism, religion, and communism (NASAKOM) ended in a takeover by Soeharto-led military force in 1965 [5] (Borgias, 2012). Under Soeharto's regime, starting in 1967, Islamic movements played important political roles, especially in eradicating the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI). However, Soeharto then implemented iron-fist "Pancasila" democracy to exclude the extreme right (Islamist) and crush the extreme left (PKI) and until the mid

1980s he repressed hardline Islamic groups [6] (Crouch 1981), including prosecuting Islamic political movements and leaders [7] (Liddle, 1996). De-politicizing Islam only allowed moderate and liberal Islam to grow mainly becoming more spiritual and intellectual activities, creating scholars, including Nurcholis Madjid with his motto of “Islam Yes, Islamic Party No” [8] (Barton, 1997).

In 1990s, unsure about his military backing, Soeharto changed course and began accepting more Islamic appeals, including allowing school girls wearing veils as well as establishing Islamic courts, Islamic family law, and Islamic banking. In addition, he re-politicized Islam by forming Association of Indonesian Islamic Intellectuals (ICMI) in 1990s, which Liddle [7] (1996) termed the “Islamic turn.” This marked the rise of conservative Islam, intensifying the Islamization of the *abangan* (nominal Muslims) [9][10] (Hefner, 2011, Nashir, 2018) and augmenting the growth of conservative Islamic politics that help the fall of Soeharto’s in 1998.

Soeharto’s fall created a euphoric desire for a more democratic Jakarta led by transitional president B.J. Habibie, who was committed to end the authoritarian system to conduct an election. In the 1999 election, secular nationalists receive most votes (56%), the moderate Islamic parties gain 31%, and the hardline Islamist parties got less than 2%. However, the Islamic parties successfully formed a “*poros tengah*” (Central Axis) to elect Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur), in place of Megawati Soekarno Putri whose nationalist party won the most votes. However, Gus Dur’s liberal and pluralist approaches frustrated conservative Muslim leaders, leading to demonstrations and his fall. This proved again that liberal democracy was not effective in consolidating the complex Indonesian politics with nationalist and Islamist tensions. With challenges of consolidating various parties, there is Jakarta significant change in the political landscape during the presidency of Megawati who succeeded Gus Dur.

During this reform era, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY), the first directly elected Indonesian president in 2009, realized he had to embrace the increasingly influential conservative Islamic movements. Thus, the hardline Islamic movements saw opportunities to convert more followers, and SBY’s indecisiveness enhanced the growth of radical Islamic movements and clerics, such as Abu Bakar Bashyir, with his appeals for sharia law and caliphate, as well as his militant followers who committed terrorist acts. SBY’s tolerance of hardline Islamic pleas in Indonesian politics enhanced intolerant Islamic discourses by radical groups, e.g. the thuggish Islamic Defender Front (FPI) and Hizbut Tahir Jakarta (HTI), politically represented by Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) which significantly gained 7,3% of votes in the 2004 election.² FPI’s and HTI’s active proselytization in mosques, government offices, and university campuses as well as SBY’s recognition of HTI as a legal civil organization, led to a HTI success as demonstrated in 2007 Jakarta mass-gathering participated by tens of thousands caliphate supporters. Martin van Bruinessen’s [11] (2013) labeled this increase as the ‘Conservative Turn,’ describing a significant growth of hardline Islamists, sparking concerns that this surprising upsurge could be uncontrollable [12] (Ricklefs, 2012). This may also be attributed to SBY’s support of the Indonesian Council of Ulama (MUI) which issued edicts against secularism, pluralism, and liberalism [13] (Sirry, 2013) and the anti-Ahmadiyya sect decree [14] (Menchik,

2016). Strong influence of hardline Islamic expressions and local conservative leaders also led nationalist parties in some 63 municipalities to enact sharia laws. This prominent of Islamic politics and discourses not only augmented Islamic hardline political power, but also dampened nationalist Pancasila discourses and marginalized various minority groups [11][12] (Van Bruinessen, 2013; Ricklef, 2012).

3. Jokowi's "Pancasila Turn"

Succeeding SBY after winning the 2014 election, Jokowi accentuated the importance of Pancasila, stating: "*saya Indonesia, saya Pancasila*" (I am Indonesia, I am Pancasila). With this discourse Jokowi attempted to constrain the growing intolerant Islamic hardliners, a significant shift from SBY's "conservative turn." Jokowi was quite successful in promoting a more secular state by dampening the discourses of sharia law and caliphate, although hardline Islamism had infiltrated the Indonesian social, bureaucratic, and academic communities.

Jokowi had shown his nationalist Pancasila and pluralist conviction earlier when he selected Basuki Tjahja Permana (Ahok), who a Chinese and Christian, as his vice governor. However, this also led his greatest challenge in his fight against the Islamic hardline movements. During the Jakarta governor election debates, the incumbent Ahok's statement on the possibility of deceitful interpretation of a Quranic verse resulting to his losing the election, a blasphemous allegation, and massive demonstrations in 2016 and 2017. This sparked an act Islamist movement called 212 led by FPI, FUI, and HTI [15] (Fanany & Fanany, 2021), challenging Jokowi's tolerant and pluralist campaigns, resulting in the prosecution and conviction of Ahok. However, Jokowi fought back by taking some undemocratic steps including: curbing the freedom of anti-government Islamic speeches, aimed at the FPI leader, Rizieq Shihab, signing an amendment making it illegal to insult Pancasila, and disbanding HTI on July 18, 2017.

However, during his second presidential election in 2019, Jokowi had to strategically succumb to the increasing pressure from Islamist sympathizers and chose Ma'ruf Amin, the MUI chairman and a conservative Muslim cleric for his vice president. This was politically important for enhancing his Islamic credential and to have a better chance of winning, because his opponent, Prabowo Subianto, received his supports mostly from conservative hardline Muslims.

Feeling free of the Islamic pressure after he winning second term, Jokowi began to re-exert his nationalist Pancasila discourse, often disregarding criticism for his anti-democratic actions against Islamic hardliners, such as his measures against academicians and government workers suspected to be active Islamists. Despite criticism of his anti-Islamist policies, Jokowi went on targeting FPI and its chairman, Rizieq Shihab, accusing him of minor offenses such as sending pornographic images leading to Rizieq Shihab's flee to Saudi Arabia. And not long after Shihab's return, Jokowi's administration banned FPI. Then during the COVID-19 pandemic, the police attempted to arrest Rizieq for violating COVID-19 protocols, resulting in the six members of FPI guards dead in the so-called the "KM 50 incident" which was a

human rights violation. Rizieg Shihab was then arrested and convicted to four years imprisonment for illegal mass gatherings and his false test result of COVID-19.

Despite these harsh undemocratic measures that violated freedom of speech and were viewed as “the authoritarian turn” [16] (Power, 2018), surveys showed that majority of Islamic organizations including the moderate nationalists supported Jokowi’s actions. This proved Jokowi’s undemocratic strategies was successful in promoting Pancasila nationalism, creating stability needed to support his development programs.

Another of Jokowi’s undemocratic approach to create more socio-political stability is to contain freedom of speech in electronic social media by enacting anti-defamation, hate speech, and blasphemy law, Electronic Information and Transactions (ITE), that covers all kinds of electronic messages. While this law has been used to prosecute those who insult Islam, this law was mostly aimed at controlling Islamic speeches that challenge government policies, Pancasila and the 1945 constitution as well as the president. These semi-authoritarian measures successfully impede the prominence of Islamists’ discourse in the Indonesian public sphere. In addition, the discourses of Pancasila and “*NKRI harga mati*” (Non-negotiable Sovereignty of the United Republic of Indonesia) dominated public discourses in different venues and media. However, critics saw Jokowi’s policies as degrading civil liberty and deteriorating democracy, as evidence in the decline Indonesia’s Democracy Index in 2020.

These firm actions were needed to compel the power and influence of rampant Islamic discourses especially when dealing with partisan religious arguments to which Indonesian Muslims tend to easily submit. Jokowi’s populism seemed to have helped his discourse of Pancasila by popularizing Pancasila discourse while focusing on his works on infrastructure projects to overshadow Islamists’ divine-based arguments. The popularity of this discourse of tolerance and unity lead to the support for banning HTI and FPI.

4. The Decline of Islamist in Indonesian Political Contestation

Throughout its history, Indonesia has been dealing with hardline Islamic appeals that can be very challenging for the development of plural, tolerant, and democratic Indonesia. Jokowi inherited the challenges of reform era and SBY’s administration that provide opportunities for Islamists to argumentatively exert their demands for sharia law and caliphate. The power and influence of Islamists’ appeals that have penetrated academic, political, and bureaucratic communities affected even some members of Muhammadiyah and NU which are known for their moderation, augmented by a wave of Islamization and Arabization supported by Saudi Arabia. Consequently, Pancasila pluralism, tolerance and secularism were under attack in various Islamic speech events, liberal Islamic movements (JIL) was slowly fading away, marginalization against minority groups, especially Christians, were still rampant. Following Soekarno and, in a way, Soeharto, Jokowi’s administration took undemocratic steps of Islamist discourses and movements, including banning HTI and FPI.

It is intriguing that Jokowi was successful in curbing Islamic hardline movements with his policies, without significant violent actions. There are different factors and strategic measures that lead to Jokowi's most effective promotion of tolerant, pluralist, nationalist discourses and control of the hardline Islamic movements. First, Jokowi's populist strategies, showing his humble posture engaging in "*blusukan*," (going through places of ordinary and poor people), successfully build a strong image of a simple ordinary man representing "*wong cilik*" (lit: "little people," meaning low class ordinary people). In addition, the social media (supported by his cyber army) also helped with the portrayal of Jokowi's image as a simple, innocent, and honest leader, who only focus on working for the people, with the motto of "*kerja, kerja, kerja*" (work, work and work). This portrayal draws the attention and sympathy of the Indonesian people who then believed that Jokowi fought for the ordinary people's welfare and wellbeing as well as for what is best for the country. He successfully strengthened this image through the portrayal of his success in developing the Indonesian infrastructure. The social media tremendously helped Jokowi's success in promoting the idea of Indonesian unity through tolerance and the motto of "*NKRI harga mati*," resulting in increasing supports in his fights against hardline Islamic discourses and movements.

Second, overwhelmed by Jokowi's defenders, critics were reluctant to launch their attacks against Jokowi's policies due to this popularity, leading to pouring supports, including from politicians who intend to maintain or improve their own approval. These politicians slowly moving away from their Islamist discourses and embracing Jokowi's discourses, paving the way for Jokowi to gain more power as well as supports from opposing political parties and their leaders. After winning the second term, Jokowi's opponent during both 2014 and 2019 presidential elections, Prabowo Subianto, joined Jokowi's government, becoming the minister of defense. During his second term, 80% of the political parties supported him, leaving only PKS and Democrat functioning as the weak oppositions. Jokowi received around 80% approval rating throughout his second term in office, further strengthening his promotion of nationalist and pluralist discourses, dampening the voices of his critics, including those of the Islamists.

Third, Jokowi combined these strategies with an authoritarian one, following Soekarno and Soeharto's regimes. Like Soekarno's presidential decree followed by the banning of *Masyumi* that subdued the unending debates involving Islamists and Soeharto's iron-fist pressure on Islamists to create political stability, Jokowi contained Islamic fundamentalism to promote tolerant nationalism for political stability by employing undemocratic approaches [17] (Suwarno, 2022). The semi-authoritarian measures were supported by the majority of the parliament members, 80% of whom are members of parties supporting Jokowi.

The decline of Islamists role in Indonesian politics was also evidenced in the 2024 presidential election. One candidate that could have advocated the Islamic discourse in Indonesian political contestation was Anies Baswedan. Baswedan won the Jakarta governor's election supported by the prominent 2017 rise in the Islamic hardliner's 212 movement against tolerant and pluralist nationalist, Ahok. While Baswedan

advocated change as his campaign motto during the 2024 presidential election campaign, there was hardly any mention of Islamic principles as his bases for advocating change. His strong Islamist supporter during this campaign, PKS, did not urge him to promote his Islamic credentials. As a matter of fact, none of the three presidential candidates clearly mentioned the importance of Islamic teachings in their campaigns. This marked the beginning of the absence of Islamic discourses in Indonesian politics.

To make matters worse, the most prominent Islamic party, PKS, who at first supported Baswedan for Jakarta governor election in 2024, withdrew its support. Instead, it joined the Coalition of Advanced Indonesia (KIM), an alliance of nationalist parties that support a nationalist candidate. This again shows the tremendous power and influence of the nationalist coalition under Jokowi. The undemocratic political process took place in modern Indonesia when a governor candidate who had the highest rating in the polls, in the end, could not become a candidate for lack of party support and because his long-time supporter, an Islamic party, abandoned him.

Recent development shows that Jokowi's populism is fading, the image of Jokowi's simple, honest gentleman is eroded due to the increase awareness of the impact of Jokowi's dynastic politics (e.g. changing the constitution so that his son could become the vice president) and his indisputable control over officials and party leaders, leaving them with no choice but to succumb to Jokowi's demands. There were recent major demonstrations staged against his political maneuvers to control PILKADA, excluding PDI, winner of the 2024 legislative election, and sidelining Anies Baswedan, while promoting his youngest son through changing the age limit in the constitution. These demonstrations and the increasing criticism of his authoritarianism and nepotic political strategies, confirms that Jokowi's power and influence is fading. It is yet unclear if this new development will provide an opportunity for the Islamists to revive their promotions of Islamic agenda such as discourses of sharia law and/or caliphate.

Although Jokowi succeeded in moderating Muslims to embrace tolerant and pluralist nationalist principle of Pancasila, the majority of the Indonesian people continue to be devoutly religious. Islam in Indonesia is conservatively strong with the majority of Indonesian Muslims practicing Islamic teachings beyond just the conventional five pillars of Islam. These include wearing Islamic attires, enforcing halal products, using sharia banking as well as actively joining Quranic recitation groups (*pengajian*), engaging in charitable activities, and preaching [18] (Fealy and White, 2008).

5. Conclusion

This paper attempts to describe the role of Islamist politics in shaping the development of Indonesian struggle for democracy. It discussed government policies throughout the history of Indonesia from Soekarno's era to Joko Widodo's administration. The first president, Soekarno, who could not deal with the challenges of liberal democracy, issued an authoritarian decree, banned the most prominent

Islamic party, Masyumi, and crushed Islamic rebellions. Soeharto's regime also used iron-fist guided Pancasila democracy and an authoritarian strategy to implement his anti-Islamic policies for the first half of his presidency. In 1990s, Soeharto began to give opportunities for conservative Muslims to exert their power and influence leading his fall, marking the beginning of the reform era. SBY's two-term presidency during the reform era attempts to create unity and stability, meddling his nationalist agenda with giving opportunity for hardline Islamist to thrive and expand their power, leading to Islamization and Arabization of Indonesia. Despite the prominence of hardline Islamic movements, Jokowi's semi-authoritarian tactics successfully promoted nationalist Pancasila discourses and banned Islamic hardline groups HTI and FPI, leading to the Islamists leaders and their discourses being subdued. His success was attributable to, among others, his successful populist strategies in gaining the people's supports and eventually leading 80% of parliamentary members supporting and defending him. The decline of Indonesian democracy index can be attributed to the absence of government oversights from opposing parties. Jokowi's success of promoting moderate and tolerant Islam, resulting in the dominance of nationalist and pluralist agenda and in absence of Islamist discourses in the 2024 presidential election. Moreover, during the local leader election, the most prominent hardline Islamic party, PKS, joined the nationalist KIM (Coalition of Advanced Indonesia) parties, marking the end of Islamist politics in Indonesian democracy. While nationalism, tolerance, and pluralism seem to have dominate the Indonesian political landscape, the Indonesian majority Muslims continue to be religiously devout, implementing the teaching of Islam in their daily lives vigorously.

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