
THE DECLINE OF CIVIL ISLAM ISLAMIST MOBILIZATION IN CONTEMPORARY INDONESIA

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Abstract

The massive Muslim mobilization having occurred since 2016 and intertwined with the issues and process of Indonesia's Presidential Election in 2019 has led to a discourse on the rise of political Islam. Fear of the emergence of radical Islamism was obvious that the state set an illiberal policy and made counter-religious politics through religious moderation. This study aims to investigate factors that have helped cause the Islamist mobilization and threaten civil Islam in contemporary Indonesia. By employing a social movement approach, the study argues that the explosion of Islamism in Indonesia is influenced by three factors. The first is the political opportunity referring to the relative stability and instability among those controlling the power. The second is the structure of social mobilization where Islamism also involves a number of mobilization processes including financial and socio-cultural resources. The third is the issue framing, suggesting that Islamism utilizes ideological and religious means to define situations, legitimize actions, and persuade supporters. Further, the combination of these three factors would determine the character and the future of Islamism in Indonesia.

Keywords: Indonesian, Islam, Islamism, political opportunity, social movement

1. Introduction

Since 2016, the Islamist groups have frequently organized mass mobilization in the form of massive demonstrations. The mobilization began with the demonstration that took place on December 2, 2016, known as the 212 Defending Islam Action (Aksi Belas Islam 212). The main goal of this movement was to prevent Jakarta's incumbent Governor named Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, known as Ahok and accused of committing blasphemy, from being re-elected in the 2017 Jakarta's Gubernatorial Election. Capitalized by Jakarta politicians, the 212 Movement succeeded in mobilizing the masses. Later, Ahok lost the election to a pair of Anis Baswedan and Sandiaga Uno. Yet, the

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movement continued to organize annual actions called the 212 Alumni Action that took place during the 2019 Indonesia's Presidential Election.

The 212 Movement invites a debate among both Indonesian society and scholars. A question arises whether the large number in Islamist mobilization is a unique phenomenon reflecting the specific circumstances of the Ahok's case [E. Aspinall, *Interpreting the Jakarta election*, 2017, <https://www.newmandala.org/>], or it is a sign for the development of a new form of Islamist populism or mobocracy [I.A. Fauzi, *Mobocracy? Counting the cost of the rallies to 'defend Islam'*, 2016, <https://indonesiaatmelbourne.unimelb.edu.au/>; 1]. Another question is concerned with whether this mass protest can be evidence of the development of conservatism in Indonesian Muslim society [T. Lindsey, *Blasphemy charge reveals real fault lines in Indonesian democracy*, 2016, <https://indonesiaatmelbourne.unimelb.edu.au/>]. If the latest question is answered affirmatively, a new question then follows; that is, whether there has been a shift in the political and religious behaviour of the Indonesian people that will influence and shape new patterns of political life for Indonesian Muslims in the coming years.

In this context, Fealy maintains that the protest of the Islamist groups is only a product of the specific situation related to Ahok's case and the Jakarta's Gubernatorial Election; therefore, it cannot be used as evidence of the trend of Indonesian Muslims widely [G. Fealy, *Bigger than Ahok: Explaining the 2 December mass rally*, 2016, <https://indonesiaatmelbourne.unimelb.edu.au/>]. In contrast, Assyaukanie argues that the protest is the peak of the iceberg showing the power of Islamic conservatism in Indonesia for the last 15 years [L. Assyaukanie, *Unholy alliance: Ultra-conservatism and political pragmatism in Indonesia*, *Thinking ASEAN*, 19 (2017)]. Besides, Mietzner and Muhtadi explain that the socio-demographic trend of Indonesian Muslim conservatism is very dynamic and that the support from middle-level economic and educated circles has increased the capacity of Islamist organizations to mobilize the masses [2]. Meanwhile, with a comparative study between Indonesia and the Middle East, Hadiz argues that Islamic populism in Indonesia in its long history has failed to dominate civil society and the State. The social agents and organizational vehicles of Islamic populism tend to be fragmented and do not have sufficient legitimacy to speak on behalf of the Muslims as a whole [3]. Looking at contemporary Indonesian populism, Hadiz then concludes that Islamic populism in Indonesia has indeed developed like in other parts of the world. However, Islamic populism in Indonesia is not yet an autonomous social force [3].

This study intends to investigate factors that have helped cause the Islamist mobilization and threaten civil Islam in contemporary Indonesia. Qualitative and interpretative in nature, the study employs a social movement approach, in contrast to the dominant monolithic view such as the religious approach and the empirical social approach. It will specifically highlight political opportunities, resource mobilization, and the issue framing used to attract the masses.

2. Islamist Movement in Indonesia

The socio-political dynamics of Indonesia after the 1998 Reform have generated new cultural and political challenges that have changed the orientation of the image of Islamic movement in the country. Following the fall of the New Order's authoritarian regime, various new groups and organizations emerged, such as the Laskar Jihad, the Islamic Defenders Front (Front Pembela Islam, FPI), Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI), the Indonesian Mujahidin Council (Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia, MMI), Ukhuwah Islamiyah Forum (Forum Ukhuwah Islamiyah, FUI), Jama'ah Islamiyah (JI), Jama'ah Ansorut Tauhid (JAT), Jama'ah Ansoru ad-Daulah (JAD), and so on. Motivated by the open democratic landscape, Islamic political parties have also been established as electoral instruments for accommodating Islamist aspirations, such as the Justice Party and the Prosperous Party which later merged into the Prosperous Justice Party (Partai Keadilan Sejahtera, PKS) and the Star-Moon Party (Partai Bulan Bintang, PBB). Islamism in Indonesia has been linked to various perspectives, such as democratization [4], its relationship with history and the State formation [5] and populist movements [1, 6-10].

Based on the Islamist response to democracy, for instance, Hilmy divides Islamism in Indonesia into two types, i.e. those that reject democratic ideas and those that occupy two attitudes, that is, between holding firmly to their Islamic identity and at the same time trying to accommodate democracy as a means of political struggle. The first type of Islamist supporters, such as HTI, MMI, JI, JAT and JAD, is referred to as utopian Islamism. They are utopians because they dream about a place or country that is completely perfect. The term utopian is attributed to some of these Islamist groups to emphasize the fact that they are obsessed with establishing an ideal state and society based on religion (Islam) [4]. Meanwhile, the second type of Islamist supporters is known as meliorist Islamism. This model of Islamism developed in the context of debates on religious ethics after World War I. Meliorist Islamism holds the view that the world can be fixed without having to reject the existing socio-political order [4]. In the context of democracy, this kind of group is brave and willing to enter into electoral politics that is rejected by the utopian groups.

Although these two types of Islamism differ in their views and attitudes towards democracy, all Islamist groups share the same goal, i.e. the creation of political order for the government and Islamic society. Their difference is with regard to the strategy that some choose a partisan political strategy through a political party and government channels, by synergizing with political lobbying and power and by giving support for political parties to fight for Islamic law. Meanwhile, the other uses strategy in the form of a social movement by emphasizing the processes of Islamization of society and the creation of new social bases for establishing the goals of Islamism [11].

22 years after the Reform, new movements of Islamism have not been able to become the main arena of political Islam in Indonesia. Yet, their response to socio-political issues is quick, even emotional and radical, making the

Islamism movement always visible to the surface and viewed by many observers as a new stream of Islamic movements [12]. The new Islamic movement groups have not only pulled a lot of interest among educated youth, especially urban Muslims but have also succeeded in bringing the ideology of Islamism to the center of discourse and Islamic movements in Indonesia [12], which recently due to political contestation gave birth to polarization as seen in the division of radical Islam and moderate Islam in Indonesia [13].

3. Political opportunity in new democratic space

Democracy in Indonesia that was revived after the collapse of the New Order became an arena for various social groups to articulate their interests, identities, and political views. With various agencies, social groups tried to mobilize the various modalities that they have, e.g. religion and ethnicity. Such a situation can be seen from various contradictory phenomena in socio-political life in the post-Reform Indonesia. While new institutions and procedures of democracy, such as political parties and electoral systems, become more democratic, and freedom is widely gained, there is a tendency that violence, religious radicalism, and Islamism also emerge at the same time. These contradictory phenomena leave a question of how this freedom has influenced the mobilization of the majority-minority of the Muslims in Indonesia. Responding to this question, Hamayotsu shows a defensive attitude and maintains that the liberal segment of civil society groups has failed in their attempts to influence the government policy. Meanwhile, conservative radical groups seemed to seize and expand their opportunities by taking advantage of the freedom of association and expression guaranteed after the Reform [14].

Later, the Jokowi presidency has taken a firm stand against Islamist groups, e.g. HTI, and restricted the movement of the FPI leader named Rizieq Shihab. However, the existence of Islamism and conservatism in the State still becomes a factor in the Islamist mobilization. They both are believed to be the fruit of SBY's policy giving the Islamist groups, especially PKS, to create a coalition with his government. With such an opportunity, the Islamists can develop a conservative vision and agenda in the name of protecting morals and religion. They have adopted various actions and policies that are considered oppressive and discriminatory against minorities, such as the 2006 Joint Decree of the Three Ministers regulating the establishment of places of worship, the 2008 Joint Decree on the prohibition of Ahmadiyah sect, and Law Number 44 of 2008 concerning anti-pornography, which are in fact against the freedom of religion and expression. Through political opportunities, Islamist groups have also succeeded in pushing an agenda for the application of Islamic law through the Regional sharia regulations (Perda Syariah) in several Indonesian regions [15]. These administrative and legal mechanisms are used by conservative Muslims as a power of discretion to regulate communication and expression of religious life as a way of realizing their political goals in line with the conservative Islamist religious vision.

The wider opportunity for the Islamists to mobilize support is caused by the weaknesses of progressive liberal groups in accessing and influencing traditional institutions such as *pesantren* and Kyai or government-supported religious institutions such as the MUI (the Indonesian Ulema Council). The progressive liberal Muslims are regarded as an alternative voice of Islam who challenges traditional Islamic authority and its views on the conservative interpretation and application of Islamic law. Although among progressive groups such as Ulil Abshar Abdalla, Abdul Muqstith Ghazali, Zuhairi Misrawi, Syafiq Hasyim, Rumadi, and others, are youth intellectuals born from the *pesantren*, the Islamist campaign has succeeded in making the opinion that those names are dangerous liberal groups. On the other hand, these liberal Muslim groups do not have a progressive Muslim figure that has access and strong political influence after the death of Nurcholis Madjid and Abdurrahman Wahid whose influence could reach out to the politicians, liberal Muslim, human rights activists and *pesantren*.

Therefore, various incidents during the last 2 decades of post-Reform have led observers of Islamic life in Indonesia to the conclusion that now is the time for the Indonesian government to face continuing challenges voiced by Muslim groups, especially utopian Islamists, to change the state ideology named Pancasila (the five principles), which is the basis for pluralism, religious tolerance, and multiculturalism in Indonesia. These Muslim groups share the same agenda, i.e. to make Indonesia an Islamic state. Some of these Islamist movements have taken a formal legal way by following the mechanisms of electoral democracy that have been more open since the Reform era, while other Islamists use violent and radical ways to fight for their agenda.

The opportunity to carry Islamist agendas either through electoral channels or other movements was open since the transition of democracy through the 1998 Reform. In the 1999 General Election, for instance, Indonesia implemented multi-parties that allowed Muslim groups to establish Islamic political parties. Then, some prominent Islamic political parties were built such as the Justice Party and the Prosperous Party which later merged to become the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) as they could not exceed the electoral threshold in the very democratic 1999 Election. Until the 2019 Election, PKS which is the strongest Islamist party only collected 8% of the votes [<https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2019/05/22/16141831/infografik-perolehan-suara-partai-politik-dalam-pemilu-2019-versi-kpu>]. However, during the two periods (10 years) of SBY's presidency, PKS managed to enter the heart of the coalition and gained long-term social and political benefits.

The era of democracy and openness has also led to the establishment of various Islamist groups that use non-democratic channels but violence in struggling for their agendas and goals. Included in this kind of Islamist groups are FPI, MMI, Laskar Jihad Ahlsunnah Waljama'ah and HTI. With the growth of such groups, religious intolerance has also increased. Violence against minority groups such as Ahmadiyah and Syi'ah in Indonesia occurred because both are considered the sects that deviate from Islamic teachings. Besides, there

have been also acts of discrimination against Christian minorities. The Christians seem to get difficulty in building places of worship because they are deemed not complying with the regulations regarding the establishment of places of worship. In addition, according to a survey conducted by the Pew Research Centre, Grim states that Indonesia is one of the countries that has very strict rules in regulating religious life. He even claims that the very strict regulations in religious life were the embodiment of pressure from religious groups (Islamists) to the government [B.J. Grim, *Indonesia's Place Along the Spectrum of Global Religious Restriction*, 2010, <https://www.pewresearch.org/2010/11/04/>].

4. Structure of social mobilization by the Islamists

Islamism in Indonesia has been actualized in various political practices, such as political participation in electoral democracy, protest movements and even violence. In these differences, both unification and clash are inevitable. As a political discourse, however, Islam is often articulated by the Islamists in order to organize collective demands on behalf of the *ummah*, the Muslim society. Therefore, by using the concept of Islamic populism, Hadiz, as stated by Baykan, sees the Islamist movement as “a major political alliance that gathers in the political claims of the *ummah* by keeping differences in interests between social forces that gather to articulate voices of injustice and encourage the interests of the alliance in the political arena” [1]. One of the strengths of the 212 Movement is its ability to unite groups with diverse ideologies such as traditionalists, modernists, salafists, and Sufi organizations to move to build opposition against Ahok [16]. Hadiz then argues that Islamism in Indonesia in the form of a new Islamic populism movement is a specific form of social mobilization based on asymmetric multi-class coalitions [1]. Therefore, it is important to explain the factors or conditions that mobilized the various Islamist movements which later at a moment became one major movement as in the case of the 212 Defending Islam Action.

However, the growing support from the middle class and the elite towards the Islamists does not deny the existence of a larger mass of the lower classes who are the main supporters of the movement. The lower class social conditions voiced by the middle and elite classes are also an effective mobilizing factor for the Islamist movement in Indonesia. In this context, reactionary politics as shown by the anger of thousands of masses at the 212 Defending Islam Action is epiphenomena [17], i.e. social symptoms related to more fundamental social problems such as social inequalities, poverty, and the precariat middle class.

Kusman refers to the data from the Credit Suisse report which shows that in 2016 around 49% of Indonesia's total prosperity was maintained by 1% (2.6 million people) of the richest people in Indonesia. Meanwhile, 77% of the total wealth of Indonesia is dominated by only 10% (26 million people), which is inversely equivalent to the control of 1.4% of the country's wealth by 100 million (40%) of the poorest people in Indonesia. In such a situation, coinciding with the rampant of the 212 Defending Islam Action, the issue of economic

domination by Chinese immigrants scattered on social media and society. At this point, the issue of inequality inevitably comes to the surface. Economically, minorities hold a significant portion of the national economic pie. The campaign to boycott foreign products and the movement to build the economy independently after the 212 Movement shows how the public is worried about the recent condition [18].

In terms of the achievement of the Human Development Index, Indonesia has indeed achieved significant progress indicated by a reduction in the absolute poverty rate from 40% to 8%. However, if measured by the World Bank version of the moderate poverty standard parameter with an income of 3.10 US dollars, the Indonesian population trapped in poverty reaches 93 million (36%). Under these conditions, according to Kusman, some of the Indonesian middle class who belong to the precariat middle-class category will easily fall back into poverty [18].

The above facts explain the factor of reactionary mobilization of the Islamists towards social imbalance which they call 'the struggle against social injustice'. However, the data also prove that Islamism in Indonesia faces the dilemma, between an autonomous power and dependent power. This dilemma is due to the absence of strong Muslim bourgeoisie in Indonesia, in contrast to the Chinese bourgeoisie who is considered their opponents. For this reason, Hadiz argues that the Islamic populists can survive only by building political negotiations with the dominant oligarchic factions that are currently struggling and becoming political instruments in it [1]. The gathering of Islamist groups to support the presidential candidate pair Prabowo Subianto - Sandiaga Uno against the incumbent pair Joko Widodo-Ma'ruf Amin in the 2019 Presidential Election is one of the strong examples of Islamist negotiations with one of the oligarchic factions raised by the New Order. As often discussed by observers and the wider community, especially his opposition, President Joko Widodo is regarded to have small Islamic credibility. The same accusation is also addressed to his rival Prabowo Subianto though, since the New Order era, Prabowo has gained support from groups representing diverse Islamic forces.

5. Issue framing and identity politics

Islamist mobilization in the Defending Islam Action cannot be separated from the wider social context. According to Robison, the various manifestations of Islamic political activism become part of social reality in a modern capitalist system that has changed socio-economic forms having been going on since the colonial era. The tension that appears in the dynamics of modern capitalism is an expression of the struggle for interests between the old forces that start to fade away and the new interests that are emerging and always moving all the time [19]. At least, the manifestation of political Islam can be understood in three major groups. The first is the conservative populist, i.e. landlords and small businessmen (petty bourgeoisie) who are encountering a decline in the social base and continue to negotiate with the colonial and modern state authorities.

The second is the reactionary Islamic activist who often uses violent political expressions. This group is a social force that grows from the products of modern urban capitalism and develops from the urbanization process. Their rebellion is a form of articulation of calls for injustice due to the problems they are facing in their lives. The third is the Islamic bourgeoisie who have political-economy ambitions to dominate the market by building business and political power [19].

With such a socio-demographic background, the explosion of Islamism as seen in the Defending Islam Action can mobilize identity politics among diverse groups of people by building social alliances that are typically multi-class. With the main objective of seizing power and resources, the Islamists want to secure religious authority by forming various alliances groups such as the Muslim Community Forum (Forum Umat Islam, FUI), FPI, the Straight-line NU (NU Garis Lurus), the National Movement for MUI Fatwa Defenders (Gerakan Nasional Pembela Fatwa-MUI, GNPf MUI) and so on, which are used to produce and control symbols, terminology and images related to an Islamic identity. In this way, the Islamists have temporarily succeeded in uniting different groups of people who experience a modernization process that marginalizes them socially, politically and economically. The strengthening of identity politics is caused by the political policies of Joko Widodo who have tried to cut off the politics of accommodation for the political interests of Islamic groups that have increased since his previous tenure.

In this context, the Islamists used the polarization that occurred especially after the Ahok's case in Jakarta and reinforced the narrative creating people's perceptions that the Jokowi's government coalition was antagonistic to the Muslim society. Feeling totally supported by Islamist powers and following Anies-Sandiaga's victory in Jakarta's gubernatorial election, Prabowo publicly thanked the FPI for supporting the winning pair. In the following months, opposition leaders such as PKS president, Sohibul Iman, repeatedly argued that the 'spirit of Jakarta's victory' must be spread to other areas especially for the upcoming presidential elections. In April 2018, Amien Rais - a senior figure of the National Mandate Party (Partai Amanat Nasional, PAN) and Chairman of the 212 Alumni Brotherhood - excitedly described Gerindra, PKS and PAN as God's party for backing the Muslims in Ahok's case, in contrast to the 'Satan party' who nominated and became the core of Jokowi's coalition [<https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20180413144201-32-290626/amien-rajs-dikotomikan-partai-setan-dan-partai-allah>].

In the Defending Islam Action, the main figures of the GNPf, FPI, and former HTI activists succeeded in forming majoritarianism named the Muslim Community or *ummah* which is portrayed as confronting the infidels, communists, and the like. Since then, a hardened identity which was previously very fluid was created. This hardened identity immediately draws a distance between us and them. In this regard, what is called Ummah itself is an empty signifier that can be filled in by anyone with an Islamic ID card, but then filled by majoritarianism formed by GNPf, FPI, and HTI. In fact, there are many Muslims who think not represented by these Islamist groups and the masses of

the Defending Islam Action because of certain differences, such as differences in schools of thought, political choices, and so on.

6. Islamism as the challenge to civil Islam

By examining the main data of socio-demographic trend among Indonesian Muslims between the early 2010s and 2016, the mass movement of the Muslim does not indicate the increase of conservatism, but a shift of the conservative-radical epicentre from the lower to the middle and even elite classes [2]. It is important to emphasize that the latter has always played a vital role in organizing Islamism. In 2016, they have developed into the strongest social group in holding intolerant views of non-Muslims. Therefore, Islamic conservatism in 2016 did not grow stronger across society as a whole, but was increasingly adopted and spread by high-income Muslims with key positions in society and the economy.

These findings are in line with important observations concerning the anti-Ahok protests. First, it confirms reports of participants in the rally, who agree that “the large participants” in the rally were the educated middle class [H.W. Weng, *Defending Islam and reclaiming diversity*, 2016, <https://www.newmandala.org/>]. Second, it reinforces claims that Islamists targeted the middle class in particular with their anti-Ahok activism. Led by “the conservative middle-class intellectuals who are confident in translating Islamic beliefs into public social activism”, the Islamist organizations then attracted “teachers, students and university lecturers” [C.J. Chaplin, *Stuck in the immoderate middle*, 2016, <https://www.newmandala.org/>]. After getting proper teaching, new academic leaders were recruited to spread Islamists’ ideas to the next generation of highly educated Muslims.

The massive demonstrations on 14 October 2016, 4 November 2016 and 2 December 2016 and during the 2019 General Election by some elements of the Islamic movement have further confirmed the opinion that sectarian political Islam becomes the dominant face of political Islam today. The combination of various political expressions, ranging from puritanical ethno-religious sentiment to racist-sectarian, political disenchantment, elite patronage politics, to class expression, is mixed into one and difficult to distinguish from each other.

What makes worried about the rise of the Islamic movement, with Political Islam as one of its exponents in Indonesia today, is that it is present amid the vacuum of a class-based political power and an increasingly mad economic neo-liberalization, especially in cities like Jakarta. The economic neo-liberalization, which creates the tough daily life for urban communities, ultimately produces an ideal environment that gives rise to religious-based solidarity and communal identity. The industrial acceleration that has taken place since the New Order created a proletarian class in large numbers. As part of a Muslim community that has been oppressed and exploited economically for a long time by a secular government, their aspiration and compliant are then accommodated by the populist Islamic movement [1].

On the other hand, Islamic civil forces such as NU and Muhammadiyah are weakened due to post-1998 political initiatives such as the establishment of political parties and the infiltration of important figures from the two organizations into the political struggle of post-New Order. In line with this, Brown even says that although NU and Muhammadiyah have played an important role in producing democratic norms and committed to religious pluralism, such an organizational stance is carried out not because of a deep ideological commitment to civil Islam, but rather as risk management of the organizations to ensure the right time for political intervention and compromise [20]. Therefore, it has resulted in the weak response and advocacy of the two organizations to crucial issues that can confront Islamism such as pluralism and freedom, as well as issues that become the framework for the struggle for populist Islamism such as poverty and marginalization by the state and neo-liberal forces.

7. Conclusions

The purpose of the current study was to investigate factors that have helped cause the Islamist mobilization and threaten civil Islam in contemporary Indonesia. As known, the strengthening of Islamic political discourse in the form of reactionary movements and exclusionary practices in Indonesia automatically reflect neither the culmination of political Islamization nor the success of intolerant radical Islamist groups in hijacking democracy. This study has found that political opportunities due to the open democratic space and exploitation of Islamism by politicians over the past 15 years have encouraged Islamic political activists to find space and get their positions in the midst of the fighting oligarchic forces. The emergence of an educated class that is capable of articulating the disappointments of the marginalized masses is another factor in the Islamist mobilization. This disappointment and feeling of being marginalized are then framed by religious languages, as seen in the Defending Islam Action. The study also finds that the vacuum of civil Islam due to the total political strategy played by large Muslim organizations such as NU and Muhammadiyah has contributed to the control of the consciousness of the marginalized groups by the Islamists.

It is unfortunate that this study on the Islamist mobilization in contemporary Indonesia does not include other aspects, such as history, organization, figures and ideology. Therefore, further studies that investigate other factors and dimensions of Islamism in Indonesia are still needed in order to establish a better degree of accuracy on this matter. Such studies will contribute to the discourse about the continuity and change of Indonesia's Islamism in the future.

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