

PRAGMATIC MOBILIZATION WITHIN ELECTION MOMENT: ISLAMIC POPULISM AND ELECTORAL COMPETITION IN INDONESIA

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Abstract: Most studies on the Islamic populism in Indonesia have only focussed on identity politics or political economy aspects. However, little attention has been paid to examining Islamic populism as an electoral campaign strategy in much detail. Therefore, this article would like to discuss how and to what extent Islamic populism works in the 2019 presidential election. We argue that Islamic populism is a pragmatic mobilization for winning electoral contestation which renews its legitimacy in election moments to gain political support. The argument builds based on the case study of *Gerakan Nasional Pembela Fatwa Ulama* in the 2019 presidential election. Utilizing qualitative method strategy, our findings in this study indicate that the logic of electoral political winning seems dominant in the mobilization of Islamic populism. At the moment of the campaign, this mobilization used religious sentiments to get voter support. Such religious-based mobilization only invites the sympathy of exclusive supporter segments and difficult to build alliances with broader elements of society because of it tends to be pragmatic. At the same time, this pragmatism also eroded the political legitimacy that it was trying to recreate and maintain during the election moment by holding Ijtima Ulama forum.

Keywords: Religious sentiment; political mobilization; electoral strategy; GNPf Ulama.

Introduction

In recent years, scholars have devoted much attention to discussing the phenomenon of the rise of Islamist-populist mobilization in Indonesia. This phenomenon began in the 2014 presidential election. Then before the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election increasingly found appearance in *Gerakan Nasional Pengawal Fatwa Majelis Ulama Indonesia*/GNPF MUI (National Movement for Guarding the Fatwa of the Indonesian Ulama Council). The birth of GNPf MUI is related to the blasphemy case that befell the incumbent candidate, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (as known as Ahok). In other words, the phenomenon of Islamic populism has a close relationship with electoral political moments.

Most studies on the Islamic populism in Indonesia have only focussed on identity politics¹ or political economy aspects.² However, little attention has been paid to examining Islamic populism as an electoral campaign strategy in much detail. At the 2019 Presidential Election, a wave of Islamic populism re-emerged in the National Movement for the Guarding of the Ulama Fatwa (GNPF Ulama) which provided political support to presidential candidates Prabowo Subianto and Sandiaga Uno (subsequently

¹ Marcus Mietzner and Burhanuddin Muhtadi, "Explaining the 2016 Islamist Mobilisation in Indonesia: Religious Intolerance, Militant Groups, and the Politics of Accommodation," *Asian Studies Review*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (2019), 493-494; Luthfi Assyaukanie, "Religion as a Political Tool: Secular and Islamist Roles in Indonesian Elections," *Journal of Indonesian Islam*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (December 2019), 454-479; Tim Lindsey, "Blasphemy Charge Reveals Real Fault Lines in Indonesian Democracy" (25 November 2016), available at <https://indonesiaatmelbourne.unimelb.edu.au/>; Sidney Jones, "Why Indonesian Extremists are Gaining Ground," *The Interpreter* (1 November 2016), available at <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/>.

² Vedi R. Hadiz, "Imagine All the People? Mobilizing Islamic Populism for Right-Wing Politics in Indonesia," *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, Vol. 48, No. 4 (2018), 566-583; Wasisto Raharjo Jati, "Trajektori Populisme Islam di Kalangan Kelas Menengah Muslim Indonesia," *Jurnal Prisma*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (2017), 19-27; Abdul Mughis Mudhoffir et al., "Populisme Islam dan Tantangan Demokrasi di Indonesia," *Jurnal Prisma*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (2017), 48-59; Vedi R. Hadiz, *Islamic Populism in Indonesia and the Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Vedi R. Hadiz, "Populisme Baru dan Masa Depan Demokrasi Indonesia," *Jurnal Prisma*, Vo. 36 (2017), 38-41.

Prabowo-Sandi). This article focuses on the question of how and to what extent Islamic populism works in the 2019 presidential election. Departing from the GNPf Ulama (hereafter GNPf-U) case in winning Prabowo-Sandi, we argue that Islamic populism is a pragmatic movement for winning electoral contestation which renews its legitimacy in election moments to gain political support. Islamic populism becomes a political instrument for winning candidates in election moments. In short, this article contributes to enrich the study of Islamic populism in Indonesia as electoral strategy in much detail.

This article based on qualitative research, we prioritize data collection using in-depth interviews, observation, and documentary study. In-depth interviews conducted with informants who were concerned about Islamic populism or electoral politics. Among them are academics, activists and figures of religious organizations, and sympathizers for 212 actions. Regarding the observation activities, the target objects are several open campaign activities (by mobilizing the masses) conducted by Prabowo-Sandi involving GNPf-U (as a case study). Through this observation, it can be seen as the extent to which the figures of GNPf-U use religious symbols in political speeches and campaign attributes. This observation also shows how important the position of GNPf-U is in the configuration of the Prabowo-Sandi team. This observation was carried out indirectly, namely through live broadcasts through YouTube. The main documents used as primary data in this study are video records about political campaigns and mass mobilization carried out by GNPf-U. Among those are the video recordings of *Ijtima Ulama, Reuni (Reunion) 212 (2018)*, *Munajat 212 (2019)*.

The discussion in this article consists of four parts. First, this section is a literature review about studies on Islamic populism and electoral politics. Islamic populism is comprehended as a part of the electoral political winning strategy. Second, a description of a brief explanation of the selected case studies. Third, an explanation of the main research findings related to the involvement of Islamic populism during the registration and nomination of Prabowo-Sandi, as well as their efforts to create a new source of legitimacy as an Ulema. Fourth, we elaboratively discuss and show moments of Islamic populism which further highlight electoral political logic to gain voter support by exploiting religious sentiments.

Islamic Populism and Electoral Politics

Conceptually, the term populism is full of debates, so the definition of populism is quite diverse among scholars.³ This diversity of conceptualizations has also led to the idea of Islamic populism. Islamic populism is one variant of populism. According to Hadiz, Islamic populism is “a specific form of social mobilization based on asymmetrical multi-class coalitions”. The central concept is “*ummah*” (community of believers) as a proxy for “the people.”⁴ Collective awareness as Muslims becomes a unifying tool of the Islamic populism movement, although factually the interests between them are very diverse. Apart from “*ummah*” as a keyword, Jati⁵ adds two things that show Islamic populism takes a different route from conventional populism. Those are Islamic populism tends to oppose democratic mechanisms, and further emphasize the strengthening of identity-based on religious symbols.

In general, the literature on Islamic populism in Indonesia can be mapped into two perspectives, political economy and identity politics. Hadiz’s understanding emphasizes more on political economy aspects. Political economy perspective focus on economic problems and structural poverty as the main triggers of the Islamic populism movement.⁶ Although economic problems matters, some others more seen that Islamic populism is a form of the political expression of religious identity and a mobilization built based on religious sentiment and conservatism.⁷ They argue that Islamist-populist movement reflected on increasing religious intolerance and radicalism.⁸ In other words, the phenomenon of religious-based mobilization “is actually rooted in the demand for

³ Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, “Exclusionary vs. Inclusionary Populism: Comparing Contemporary Europe and Latin America,” *Journal of Government and Opposition*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (2013), 147 - 174.

⁴ Hadiz, *Islamic Populism*, 4, 20.

⁵ Jati, “Trajektori Populisme Islam”.

⁶ See Hadiz, “Imagine All the People”; Hadiz, “Populisme Baru,” 38-41; Jati, “Trajektori Populisme Islam”; Mudhoffiret al., “Populisme Islam,” 48-59; Hadiz, *Islamic Populism*.

⁷ Assyaukanie, “Religion as a Political Tool”; Jati, “Trajektori Populisme Islam”; Fealy, “Bigger than Ahok”; Jones, “Why Indonesian Extremists”; Lindsey, “Blasphemy Charge.”

⁸ Mietzner and Muhtadi, “Explaining the 2016 Islamist Mobilisation,” 482.

recognition and therefore cannot simply be satisfied by economic means.”⁹ Without neglecting economic and identity aspects, this article emphasizes another aspect, namely the electoral strategy.

Although extensive studies have been carried out on Islamic populism in Indonesia, few studies address the issue of Islamic populism as electoral strategy.¹⁰ The main weakness of the current literature about Islamic populism as electoral strategy is the failure to explore Islamic populism as a political strategy for winning electoral politics in much detail, as discussed in this article. At the same time, the study of electoral winning strategies in Indonesia has so far been dominated by patronage and clientelism political themes. Patronage and clientelism politics become the dominant winning strategy in electoral moments.¹¹ Targeting this gap in the literature, this article explores the question of how and to what extent Islamic populism works in the 2019 presidential election.

Islamic populism here is better understood as a political strategy that emphasizes the pragmatic and opportunistic aspects of the political elite.¹² Islamic populism here is understood as part of the candidate’s political strategy in winning the electoral political competition. Therefore, Islamic populism in this article is understood as a political mobilization based on collective identity as an *ummah* as well as strengthening identity-based on religious symbols at the moment of electoral politics to campaign and to

⁹ Francis Fukuyama, *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2018).

¹⁰ Rendi Adiwilaga et al., “Quo Vadis Islamic Populism? An Electoral Strategy,” *Central European Journal of International and Security Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (2019), 432-453.

¹¹ Edward Aspinall and Weiss Berenschot, *Democracy for Sale: Election, Clientelism, and The State in Indonesia* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2019); Edward Aspinall et al., “Vote Buying in Indonesia: Candidate Strategies, Market Logic and Effectiveness,” *Journal of East Asian Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (March 2017), 1-27; Edward Aspinall and Noor Rohman, “Village Head Elections in Java: Money Politics and Brokerage in the Remaking of Indonesia’s Rural Elite,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 48, No. 1 (February, 2017), 31-52; Edward Aspinall and Mada Sukmajati (eds.), *Electoral Dynamics in Indonesia: Money Politics, Patronage, and Clientelism at the Grassroots* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2016).

¹² So far, political theorists discussed and distinguished populism as a political style or as a political strategy. More detail discussions, see Carlos de la Torre, “Global Populism: Histories, Trajectories, Problems, and Challenges,” *Routledge Handbook of Global Populism*, ed. Carlos de la Torre (New York: Routledge, 2019), 6.

win the candidates. With this interpretation, this article views Islamic populism as an elite instrument that competes in electoral political moments to influence and gain voter support.

The mobilization reflects more of the pragmatic interests on winning electoral politics. This understanding is inspired by Kurt Weyland which defines populism as “political strategy” or “the methods and instruments of winning and exercising power.”¹³ However, the emphasis on components is slightly different from Weyland’s. Weyland defined a political strategy with three components; “a personal leader appeals to a heterogeneous mass of followers, the leader does so in a direct manner, and political organizing takes the form of personal vehicles with low levels of institutionalization.”¹⁴ While the components emphasized here are candidates who attract to Islamic-based masses, the candidates interact directly in moments of electoral campaigns, and take advantage of political community that are not properly institutionalized, such as GNPF-U.

With this interpretation, Islamic populism is difficult to expect as an important political subject in determining substantive public policies or quality of governments. Instead, their presence is only considered important precisely at moments of electoral political competition¹⁵. Besides, Islamic populism in Indonesia is also less likely to become a political tool for marginal people.¹⁶ It is even more likely to be a tool of competition between political elites at electoral moments. Conservative interpretations of Islamic doctrines have been used by elites to compete by mobilizing piety.¹⁷ This kind of awareness is important to emphasize to show how Islamic populism is part of the electoral winning strategy. Populism is not only inherent in certain movements. Mobilization of the movement becomes populist when the logic of populism is

¹³ Kurt Weyland, “Clarifying a Contested Concept: Populism in the Study of Latin American Politics,” *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 34 (October, 2001), 12-14; Kurt Weyland, “Populism: A Political-Strategic Approach,” *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, eds. Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 55.

¹⁴ Robert R. Barr, “Populism as a Political Strategy,” *Routledge Handbook of Global Populism*, ed. by Carlos de la Torre (New York: Routledge, 2019), 46.

¹⁵ Mudhoffir et al., “Populisme Islam,” 49.

¹⁶ Hadiz, “Populisme Baru,” 41.

¹⁷ Hadiz, “Imagine All the People,” 15.

more prominent. Conversely, the same movement can become not populist (in term of the people versus the elite), when characterized by other political logic.¹⁸

GNPF Ulama and the 2019 Presidential Election

Indonesia is a country with the largest Muslim population in the world. Muslim citizens are one of the segments of voters that are taken into account in every momentum of the presidential election. Since 2004, presidential (paired with vice-president) elections in Indonesia have been held directly which every citizen who has the right to vote can directly vote for the preferred candidate. Up to now, direct presidential elections have been held four times (2004, 2009, 2014, and 2019). In the last two presidential elections, the candidates competing were the same political figures, namely Joko Widodo (incumbent president) and Prabowo Subianto (Soeharto's former son-in-law and New Order general). In the the 2019 presidential election, Prabowo was paired with Sandiaga Uno (the young entrepreneur), while Jokowi was paired with Ma'ruf Amin (the head of the Indonesian Ulama Council/ MUI).

At the 2019 Presidential Election, a wave of Islamic populism re-emerged in the National Movement for the GNPF Ulama which provided political support to presidential candidates Prabowo Subianto and Sandiaga Uno (subsequently Prabowo-Sandi). Historically, GNPF-U was a transformation of GNPF MUI. The main demand of GNPF MUI is to prosecute Ahok. Subsequently, their demands have expanded and led to a series of demonstrations of Aksi Bela Islam.¹⁹ Their political demands also

¹⁸ Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005), 117-118.

¹⁹ *Aksi Bela Islam* initiated by the Front Pembela Islam (FPI/Islamic Defenders Front). Some figures such as Habib Rizieq and Bachtiar Nasir then continued to coordinate because the legal process of Ahok considered moving slowly. More clearly, after the first *Aksi Bela Islam*, conservative Islamic leaders united and agreed to form a joint forum under the name of GNPF-MUI. The purpose of this joint movement was to carry out demonstrations demanding that Ahok be tried as fairly as possible. Bachtiar Nasir, who later became chairman of GNPF-MUI, is a figure who has a Salafi-Wahabi orientation and came from the conservative wing of Muhammadiyah, see R. Kusumo and Hurriyah, "Populisme Islam di Indonesia: Studi Kasus Aksi Bela Islam oleh GNPF-MUI Tahun 2016-2017," *Jurnal Politik*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (2018), 91-92.

involve the issue of rejecting non-Muslim leaders, even issues concerning the formalization of Islamic Shari'ah. This is in line with the opinion expressed by Fealy that rejecting and prosecuting Ahok (the Chinese-Christian governor of Jakarta) is only one part of a much broader Islamization effort and preservation of Islamic conservatism in Indonesia.²⁰ This Islamization is related to demands for the formalization of Islamic law, the prohibition of non-Muslim leaders in the Muslim community, and the nomination of candidates who support Islamist goals.

The exertion of MUI in GNPf does not mean that GNPf MUI is part of the MUI. One of the administrators of the Central MUI, Aminudin Yakub, emphasized that the chronology of the formation of the GNPf had nothing to do with the MUI, either structurally or culturally (interview with Aminudin Yakub, October 2019). Even so, the fact that the GNPf-MUI movement and the Aksi Bela Islam involved "extreme" groups in the MUI is certainly undeniable. This fact explains that extreme groups in the MUI control Islamic discourse within the MUI.²¹ In short, they were able to direct and influence other MUI members.

In short, GNPf MUI is the name during the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election moment, while GNPf-U is the name created during the 2019 Presidential Election. Thus, the establishment of the GNPf-U has very clear political objectives. However, from the perspective of the GNPf-U elite (Yusuf Martak), the transformation serves a noble purpose. This change is none other than to make the GNPf-U wider in its reach in guarding the fatwas of the Ulama. It is as if replacing the term MUI with Ulama is nothing but so that their community service work is wider in scope.²²

By changing to GNPf-U, the organizational leadership structure also changed. In the old structure (GNPf MUI), Bachtiar Nasir was the chairman, and Munarman the general secretary. Meanwhile, in the new structure (GNPf-U) the general chairman

²⁰ Fealy, "Bigger than Ahok."

²¹ Moch. Nur Ichwan, "MUI, Gerakan Islamis, dan Umat Mengambang," *Jurnal Ma'arif*, Vol. 11 (2016), 87-104.

²² "GNPf Ulama Klaim Umat Ingin Capres Selain Jokowi," <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20180313135244-32-282583/gnpf-ulama-klaim-umat-ingin-capres-selain-jokowi>; accessed on November 02, 2019.

is Yusuf Muhammad Martak, with the Secretary-General Muhammad Al Khaththath. However, complete and detailed information about the organizational structure of GNPf-U is difficult to find. This shows that GNPf-U is an organization that does not have a well-organized and institutionalized structure.

GNPF-U is a community of diverse interests and actors. Some of them are representations of the Islamic Defenders Front (Front Pembela Islam), (ex) Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia, and other Salafi groups. This means that groups which have been known to reject democracy system were also involved during the momentum of electoral democracy (for more extensive discussion about approaches on relation Islam and Democracy, see Masdar Hilmy).²³ The 2018 elections and the 2019 presidential elections are opportunities for them to develop a narrative of various interests, so the way to read it cannot be generalized. Apart from the variety of the GNPf-U actor category, for the 2019 presidential election, they were at least bound by one common issue to win Prabowo and defeat Jokowi in the second period.

Regarding electoral politics, particularly in the 2018 elections and 2019 presidential elections, the elite of GNPf-U explicitly acknowledged its concern to provide political education for Muslims, so that they choose candidates who are competent and have a good track record.²⁴ This desire is certainly very noble and quite ideal if it really can carry out the function of political education. It is not easy to carry out this function, especially if political identity and the politicization of religious sentiments are more prioritized in the competition for electoral politics.

In the 2019 presidential election moment, MUI was an organization that was targeted as a source of legitimacy by GNPf-U actors. MUI is considered important as a source of legitimacy to gain the sympathy of the wider Muslim community and to succeed in their political agenda. However, when MUI made a disclaimer that MUI had nothing to do with them, and even asked to remove

²³ Masdar Hilmy, "Muslims' Approaches to Democracy: Islam and Democracy in Contemporary Indonesia," *Journal of Indonesian Islam*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (June 2007), 42-74.

²⁴ "GNPF MUI Berubah Nama Jadi GNPFU untuk Perjuangkan Misi yang Lebih Luas," <https://www.tribunnews.com/nasional/2018/03/13/gnpf-mui-berubah-nama-jadi-gnpf-ulama-untuk-perjuangkan-misi-yang-lebih-luas>; accessed on November 02, 2019.

the name MUI, GNPf-U actors could no longer use MUI as a source of legitimacy for their political mobilization. Therefore, they need a new source of legitimacy.

After failing to obtain the legitimacy of MUI, GNPf-U then created a new source of legitimacy at the 2019 presidential election moment. By holding momentum known as the Ijtima Ulama (hereafter IU) to get a new source of legitimacy. During the Prabowo-Sandi nomination process, they held IU twice.²⁵ Among the important results of the first IU was to propose Prabowo Subianto as a presidential candidate with Habib Salim Segaf Al-Jufri or Abdul Somad as his vice-presidential candidate. While among the important results of the second IU was the agreement to sign an integrity pact between GNPf-U and Prabowo who then chose Sandiaga Uno as his vice-presidential candidate.

The first IU was held on 27-29 July 2018. This event was attended by hundreds of participants consisting of ulemas and national figures. The opening ceremony was attended by several ulemas, national figures, and leaders of political parties. The leaders of these political parties include Prabowo Subianto (Gerindra Party), M. Sohibul Iman (Prosperous Justice Party), Zulkifli Hasan (National Mandate Party), Yusril Ihza Mahendra (Crescent Star Party), and Hutomo Mandala Putra or Tommy Suharto (Berkarya Party). One of the national figures who is very vocal and actively involved in the IU is Amin Rais.

The first IU succeeded in formulating recommendations that explicitly showed the position and interests of GNPf-U in the 2019 presidential election. The main issue was related to national leadership, more specifically related to Prabowo nomination. Participants unanimously agreed to recommend Prabowo. The decision was binding on all participants to provide maximum

²⁵ After the 2019 presidential election, GNPf-U also held the third and fourth Ijtima Ulama. In the third Ijtima Ulama, the points produced include concluding that there has been structured, systematic, and massive fraud in the 2019 presidential election. Meanwhile, in the fourth Ijtima Ulama, some of the points are the need to build cooperation from the center to the regions, between Islamic organizations and political parties that have been struggling with Ulama and Muslims to defend religion, nation and state, see "Hasil Ijtima Ulama III: Laporkan Kecurangan hingga Diskualifikasi 01," <https://kumparan.com/kumparannews/hasil-ijtima-ulama-iii-laporkan-kecurangan-hingga-diskualifikasi-01-1qzkDtNT3EG>; accessed on November 03, 2019.

support. IU also requires participants to disseminate the results of recommendations to all Muslims in Indonesia. The participants also stated their mandate to Habib Rizieq Shihab (hereinafter HRS), as Chairperson of the GNPf-U Board of Trustees (Dewan Pembina), to make decisions regarding the political constellation that occurrence in the 2019 presidential election (kumparan, 2018). The alliance between Prabowo and GNPf-U was a strange alliance because ideologically opposed.²⁶

The second IU was held on September 16, 2018, at the Grand Cempaka Hotel, Cempaka Putih, Jakarta. The second IU produced an integrity pact agreed upon by Prabowo and GNPf-U. In general, the points of agreement are related to Pancasila values, the 1945 Constitution and religious values and moral norms. Besides, the political contract also contains ideal demands to favour the interests of the people, the interests of Muslims, law enforcement, and also respect freedom of association. Not only that, Palestinian independence and the threats of communism also received attention. With these normative agreement points, it seems to show that the second IU is merely a formality to maintain the legitimacy of GNPf-U.

In other words, to obtain their legitimacy, GNPf-U efforts were also not easy. Many people commented cynically and unsympathetically with their political agenda. To deny these negative perceptions, during speeches and political campaigns, Yusuf Martak emphasized that the Ulema who are members of the IU are not fake Ulema, among them are Tengku Zulkarnain, Syukron Makmun, Habib Salim Segaf Al-Jufri, Sobri Lubis, Slamet Maarif, Fikri Bareno, and Habib Hanif.²⁷ Besides the negative response, GNPf-U is also weak in its bargaining position in the alliance with Prabowo. GNPf-U do not have a strong economic or social basis, so it is easy to exploit. One of the 212 sympathizers considered that GNPf-U tended to be used by Prabowo. Arbain states that:

The most dominant is more utilized. The proof, for example, the recommendation of Ijtima Ulama was not carried out, because they convinced that they might not support Jokowi, and

²⁶ Interview with Ichwan, October 2019.

²⁷ GerindraTV, "Subuh Berjamaah dan Kampanye Akbar Prabowo-Sandi," *YouTube* (April 06, 2019), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oUFvZr1jAec>.

would certainly support them even though he chose Sandi (as a vice-presidential candidate). This dilemmatic position weakens their bargaining position, and unable to do much when their proposals are not accommodated.²⁸

Nevertheless, their existence cannot fully be seen as a part to be used. More precisely, they use each other because GNPf-U also consists of politically conscious actors, although in certain cases they cannot control Prabowo. As political actors, each of the groups that are members of the GNPf-U, or in the Prabowo team in general, actually understand their respective positions and goals.

Thus, the direction of the objective of organizing IU is quite clear, it cannot be separated from the 2019 electoral political moment. The GNPf-U agendas should be read as a package to win Prabowo in the 2019 presidential election. Their political strategy is to build religious sentiments in the name of the interests of the Muslims. It is as if they believe that Prabowo is a representation of the interests of Muslims (although after the Presidential Election, Prabowo disappointed them because he joined the coalition of the Jokowi government, holding the post of Defense Minister). At the same time, they also considered that Jokowi's victory could threaten Muslims. Islamic groups involved in supporting one candidate are common and occur in the context of electoral contestation in Indonesia. The involvement of Islamic groups in electoral contestation has strengthened and drawn attention since the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election.

The implementation of IU also marks the return of Islamic populism to colour the political dynamics of the 2019 presidential election. Their presence sends a message that they will be involved in the registration and nomination process of candidates. They also assume that their success in the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election can be copied and pasted in the presidential election. It is not surprising that the campaign strategies used in the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election are also trying to be repeated. Some important moments of Islamic populism were seen during the winning campaign, starting from *Reuni 212* (02 December 2018), *Munajat 212* (February 21, 2019), and *Subuh Berjamaah* (Fajr Congregation) (April 7, 2019). On one hand, these moments explain how the exploitation of religious sentiment became one of

²⁸ Interview with Arbain, October 2019.

the winning strategies as the mainstay of GNPF-U to gain voter support. They imagine that success in the 2017 Jakarta elections can be repeated in the 2019 presidential election. On the other hand, these moments also show how the political logic of electoral winning appears dominant in the mobilization of Islamic populism.

Islamic Populism as Electoral Campaign Strategy

In 2018, the PA 212 (*Persaudaraan Alumni*/Alumni Fellowship) held a grand reunion of alumni 212. This reunion felt somewhat different because, before the 2019 presidential election, even the term used was no longer alumni, but *Mujahid 212*. According to Bernard Abdul Jabbar's claim, as the General Secretary of PA 212, the mass of more than eight million came.²⁹ However, some people doubt the claim and try to refute that the number of participants is no more than 1 million.

The refutation is based on the count estimation by dividing the area of the road with the space needed by the mass of action. If *Reuni 212* was a very crowded mass, the estimated number of participants was at most 772,976 people.³⁰ Regardless of the number of debates, of course, many agree that the mass present is quite massive. It is not easy to mobilize the masses with such a large amount. One important factor that drives is religious sentiment. This is in line with what Fukuyama has emphasized the importance of the identity aspect in religion-based mobilization.³¹

Normatively, this reunion is not a political campaign, because open campaigns should not be carried out yet. However, the event symbolically "head start" of the open campaign. Most figures who spoke implicitly make statements that lead to electoral contestation. Even Zulkifli Hasan distinctly expressed his concern that he would be tempted to campaign.³² This *Reuni 212* is part of the political consolidation of Islam groups supporting Prabowo. With only bringing Prabowo, it also explained that the event

²⁹ An-Najah TV, "Reuni Akbar Mujahid 212; Tegakkan Kalimat Tauhid," *YouTube* (2018, December 01).

³⁰ H. Abdulsalam, "Reuni 212: Benarkah Klaim 8 Juta Peserta?" (2018, December 4), <https://tirto.id/reuni-212-benarkah-klaim-8-juta-peserta-daTm>.

³¹ Francis Fukuyama, *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Girou, 2018).

³² An-Najah TV, "Reuni Akbar."

tendentiously provided support. Even though in his remarks, Prabowo said that he must obey the rules and may not carry out political campaigns at this reunion. He also praised this activity which involved thousands of people, but it was orderly and peaceful.

On the same occasion, Tengku Zulkarnain delivered a scathing speech about Jokowi's government. With a sarcastic tone, he underestimated the achievements of Jokowi's success in prioritizing infrastructure development in his first period. According to him, if just building infrastructure, the Dutch colonizers also did it. He also said that the president of his choice was an army guarded by Ulema.³³ The intended army figure is none other than Prabowo. The glorification of Prabowo's figure who appears to care about Muslims and integrity also triggered the emergence of massive political propaganda on social media.

During this reunion, HRS also virtually-delivered an optimism about Prabowo's victory. According to him, the door of change was close before the eyes, inviting participants to gather close to the line of struggle. In its closing remarks, HRS delivered the following mandate of the struggle:

This is the mandate of struggle, not campaigning, not political propaganda, not reunion politicization. Pay attention to everything closely, focused, serious. The mandate is for 2019 Presidential and Legislative Elections, we are obliged to fight together for change, it is forbidden for us to choose presidential candidates and legislative candidates that are carried by parties supporting religious dissidents. Parties that are anti-Shari'ah, parties that pretend to carry Pancasila (five principles) but turn out anti-Pancasila. In my opinion, a change soon before our eyes is 2019 to replace the president.³⁴

HRS's oration shows how the narrative of populism constructed in the momentum of *Reuni 212*. A narrative wanted to show that this country is led by ruthless elites. Not only that, but the elites are also considered as compradors and admirers of the neoliberal economy which afflicts the people. This narrative of populism is trying to be highlighted; however, it seems clear that the main political agenda is "2019 replace the President."

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ FRONT TV, "Malam Munajat 212 2019," *YouTube* (2019, February 21).

Not just because of the HRS figure, it is this populism narrative that also invites some circles to get involved in the action. This is in line with the recognition of one of the Muhammadiyah's young cadres, Cahyo Seftiyono, that Muhammadiyah cadres involved in the GNPf exist, even they have been consolidating since the 2017 Jakarta elections. In his opinion, they thought it is an elite that needs to be fought. The intended arbitrariness is not only related to the elite of politicians at the national level but also the disappointment of elites at the local level.³⁵ However, basically what happened in the *Reuni 212* was part of the aspiration to defeat Jokowi in the 2019 Presidential Election. The Jokowi regime considered to be incompatible with the values believed by most Islamic groups incorporated in GNPf-U.

Politicization of Religious Sentiments

In the event of *Munajat 212* (February 21, 2019), Neno Warisman read the poem which became the subject of public discussion. Part of the poetic phrases that provoke controversy is "don't leave us, and win us, because if you don't win, we're worried, O God, that no one will worship You anymore."³⁶ Some welcomed her with a positive response and found for justification. However, not a few also criticized and considered unethical to ask God with such phrases. Despite the controversy, what Warisman did was trying to play religious sentiments. The 2019 presidential election contest was as if personified as war and jihad defending religion. There is an effort to build a narrative about Muslims who try to fight a ruling regime that is considered to discredit Muslims.

In the Jokowi era, extremism and intolerance did get attention. Even the term intolerance that unfound in the *Rencana Pembangunan Jangka Menengah Nasional* (RPJMN/National Medium Term Development Plan) of the Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono era, can be found in the Jokowi era.³⁷ The hatred of some Muslims towards Jokowi later heightened by the dissolution of Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI). This commitment led to the assumption that he was not friendly to Muslims. In Mietzner's language, Jokowi's

³⁵ Interview with Cahyo Seftiyono, October 2019.

³⁶ FRONT TV, "Malam Munajat 212 2019."

³⁷ Interview with A. M. Dja'far, October 2019.

steps referred to as “Fighting Illiberalism with Illiberalism,”³⁸ or according to Warburton and Aspinall³⁹ considered as one of the democratic regression precedents in Indonesia.

The Islamic community involved in the actions (such as *Munajat 212*) requires identity and interest representations. Therefore, it is understandable that some organize themselves so that they have representation in the legislative and executive or president, and it is legitimate to organize themselves.⁴⁰ The question then is the extent to which such groups are committed to improving democratization in Indonesia. To the extent that their existence is contributory to the process of democratization, of course, it is positive. Otherwise, it is certainly worth reconsidering to build such identity politics.

Campaign models such as *Munajat 212* in economic terms have what is called a “captive market.” So, it cannot be denied that the politicization of religious sentiments also has a market segment. Some Muslims have been touched and carried away in the flow of this campaign model. Even for their groups, it can strengthen their beliefs. As though everything that the religious leaders said is absolute, including the issue of the PKI and the like. This method considered effective to treat Prabowo-Sandi’s supporters and sympathizers. Not only voter segments in rural areas, even for urban voters are also possible.

This politicization of religious sentiment created extraordinary polarization in society. Even the polarization occurs internally within the Muslim community itself. Although there was no open confrontation, polarization and competition between religious mass organizations also occurred, especially between Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Non-NU (Muhammadiyah and others). Ma’ruf Amin’s existence as a vice presidential candidate is automatically read as a representation of NU. Therefore, religious mass organizations that are not in line with NU will automatically

³⁸ Marcus Mietzner, “Fighting Illiberalism with Illiberalism: Islamist Populism and Democratic Deconsolidation in Indonesia,” *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 91, No. 2 (2018), 261-282.

³⁹ Eve Warburton and Edward Aspinall, “Explaining Indonesia’s Democratic Regression: Structure, Agency, and Popular Opinion,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 41, No. 2 (August 2019), 255-285.

⁴⁰ Interview with Arbain, October 2019.

position the 2019 Presidential Election as part of the struggle to defeat NU.⁴¹

Speaking about the politicization of this religious sentiment, what is also interesting to see is how the Jokowi team tried to counter this strategy. Some of the efforts made, for example, can be seen from how they recruited or utilized people who had an alliance with GNPf-U. For example, by choosing the Vice President Ma'ruf Amin. Regarding this politics of accommodation, Törnquist rated it as a smart tactic, thereby reducing Prabowo's ability to maximize the Islamic populist movement that succeeded in bringing down Ahok.⁴² Jokowi's accommodation politics also recruited several important figures (such as Ali Mughtar Ngabalin, or Yusril Ihza Mahendra) who had allied with Prabowo's group. Ahok's defeat seems to be a lesson for Jokowi to anticipate the political power of Islamic populism.⁴³

Exploiting Religious Symbol to Gain Voters

Symbolically, the influence of GNPf-U was quite dominant in the grand campaign carried out in April 2019 at the Bung Karno Stadium. This can be seen from the design of campaign events that specifically Islamic and using the "*Subuh Berjamaah*" (Fajr Congregation) diction. Even Prabowo openly praised the Chairman of GNPf-U, Yusuf Muhammad Martak. Martak is considered as the most important person in this grand campaign activity. Although in a joking tone, spontaneity in saying the praise also worthy of reckoning. GNPf-U did get more space and opportunities on the stage compared to coalition partners from political parties.

According to Al-Khaththath, this grand campaign was part of a simulation to "whiten" (by wearing white cloths) the polling station (*Tempat Pemungutan Suara/TPS*) on April 17. He invited supporters of Prabowo-Sandi to hold Subuh Akbar, by reading the

⁴¹ Interview with Hamzah Sahal, October 2019; Cahyo Seftyono, Oktober 2019.

⁴² Olle Törnquist, "Many Votes, Little Voice: Indonesia's 2019 Presidential and Parliamentary Elections," *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 92, No. 3 (September 2019), 459-474.

⁴³ Charlotte Setijadi, "Ahok's Downfall and the Rise of Islamist Populism in Indonesia," *ISEAS Perspective*, No. 38 (June 2017), 1-9.

Qur'an and the MUI fatwa about electing leaders in elections.⁴⁴ The MUI fatwa was issued at Ijtima Ulama in the city of Padang Panjang, West Sumatra, in 2009. Al-Khaththath also looks cynical by teasing leadership figures that leaders who are not fathonah (not intelligent) are the imbeciles (*plonga-plongo*) leader. This statement does not explicitly mention Jokowi, but such satire directed towards Jokowi personally.

In addition to personal criticism, some figures also delivered negative campaigns to criticize the performance of the Jokowi government, ranging from the issue of repressed freedom of expression to economic problems. This criticism of repressed freedom of speech related to the issue of “criminalization” of Ulemas and supporters of Prabowo-Sandi. While criticism in the economic sector includes issues related to unemployment, import policies, and increases in electricity fares. Besides, there is also a cynical response to Jokowi’s campaign program to provide “card” based services, such as the *Kartu Pra Kerja* (Pre-Work Card). With the argument that people nowadays need jobs more than cards.

GNPFU leaders also realized the importance of using social media to win Prabowo-Sandi. One example is what Bachtiar Nasir did. During the speech, he said that “Just one minute, but insyaAllah, this one-minute shook Indonesia and the world. Ready to viral? Ready to viral? April 17, vote number 2, April 17 vote for Prabowo and Sandi, April 17 vote for Indonesia.”⁴⁵ The call to neutralize shows how the leaders of GNPFU are aware of the importance of using social media to mobilize voters. As stated by Stetka, Surowiec, and Mazák that social media allowed political actors to mobilize voters.⁴⁶

The role of social media is indeed very large. Ichwan sees this as “*mediated Islamic mobilization*” which is quite effective. There is an identity formation constructed with worries on one side, and with hopes on the other side. There are concerns about liberalism, communism, heresy, LGBT threats, also the destruction of the

⁴⁴ GerindraTV, “Subuh Berjamaah dan Kampanye Akbar Prabowo-Sandi,” *YouTube* (2019, April 06).

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Vaclav Stetka et al., “Facebook as An Instrument of Election Campaigning and Voters’ Engagement: Comparing Czechia and Poland,” *European Journal of Communication*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (2019), 121-141.

nation, corruption, and others. There is a moral panic that is managed and always raised. Then again, there are also hopes of victory and glory, utopia. These factors are interconnected.⁴⁷ However, this kind of organizing strategy tends to be exclusive and limited to certain group segments. This is what makes GNPFU difficult and fails to embrace a wider range of elements of society, both Islamic and non-Islamic elements.

In this grand campaign, virtually, HRS actively involved in inviting supporters and sympathizers, as well as all elements of society that were in line with it to guard Prabowo-Sandi's victory. The narrative built was to whiten GBK (and TPS) and *Subuh Berjamaah*.⁴⁸ Unfortunately, this call to "*Putihkan TPS*" (whiten the polling station) was later hijacked by Jokowi's team as his political opponent. Thus, the call "*Putihkan TPS*" withered before it developed and could not work for the Prabowo-Sandi winning strategy.

Almost all figures of GNP-F-U are very optimistic about Prabowo-Sandi's chances of victory. Ironically, on the one hand, they are quite optimistic about winning the election, but on the other hand, they build narratives about cheating. As if to build the impression that if in the future Prabowo-Sandi loses, it happens because there is a fraud. Speaking of this fraud, in essence, both parties have the same potential. The important thing to do should be to prove the practice of cheating. By convincingly preparing evidence of fraud, it can also become a political education for the public at large.

The general chairman of the Democratic Party, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, also raised objections to the design of this grand campaign. The objection letter had enlivened the public. Many people appreciated and praised him as a statesman because he gave valuable lessons about the importance of avoiding political campaign strategies that sharpened the existing polarization. From the symbols and narratives built, this grand campaign indeed tends to be exclusive. The objection letter certainly hurt the Prabowo-Sandi team, considering that Democrats are part of the coalition that supports them. Automatically the building of the coalition that was built became fragile and unstable, even though from the

⁴⁷ Interview with Moch N. Ichwan, October 03, 2019.

⁴⁸ GerindraTV, "Subuh Berjamaah."

beginning the Democrats were rather half-hearted in this coalition's ranks.

The public response to this grand campaign is quite diverse. Some consider it reasonable, but some judge it as not good for the future of democracy because it has a dividing effect on the people. In addition to the potential to divide, the mobilization of religious-based campaigns is only utilized by the power and oligarchy force. This makes some of the public quite pessimistic about the existence of Islamic populism groups. In the end, Islamic populism was limited to being a tool of struggle in winning electoral contestation in Indonesia.

As confirmed by Lutfi Assyaukanie that religion is vulnerable to being a political tool in electoral contestation, both by religious and secular actors.⁴⁹ The use of religious symbols is quite desirable in attracting the emotions of the masses to shape how people define, access information, and act in the context of electoral politics, that includes determining political preferences regarding which candidates they should support.⁵⁰ The use of religion like this reflects the poor performance of political parties, both in the context of electoral and post-electoral moments.

At the same time, the more fundamental aspects related to the ideas and visions of candidates' political programs are often overlooked. Though this aspect is far more important for improving the process of democratization in the post electoral moments. In short, a more serious political education is needed to encourage the public to be more rational in providing political support, as well as more concerned with programmatic political aspects. Not only that, ideally the winning strategy should also avoid exploitation of religious identities and symbols, spreading hate speech, hoaxes, slander and the like.

Conclusion

Our analysis of the politics of GNPF-U in the 2019 presidential election shows how Islamic populism better understood as an electoral political strategy. Islamic populism

⁴⁹ Assyaukanie, "Religion as a Political Tool."

⁵⁰ Aulia Nastiti and Sari Ratri, "Emotive Politics: Islamic Organizations and Religious Mobilization in Indonesia," *Journal of Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (2018), 196-221; Interview with Muhammad Mahsun, October 2019.

became a candidate political instrument to win the electoral competition. Concerning Islamic populism and electoral politics in Indonesia, our study confirms that the political mobilization based on identity and Islamic symbols took place massively to get voters, especially from the Islamic mass base. This mobilization had started at a pre-electoral moment, through the 212 alumni reunion as a first step to consolidating their strength and network. Since this reunion, it has been clear who the candidates they will be supported, as well as who will take advantage of GNPF-U. This became clearer during the nomination period with the holding of IU as a new political legitimacy, both the first and second. Until in the end they publicly stated their political support, as well as being part of the Prabowo-Sandi winning team.

The mass mobilization that was part of the moment of Islamic populism was increasingly vulgar to be seen during the campaign period of the candidate pairs. At these moments of Islamic populism, the campaign strategy used was to politicize religious sentiments and exploit Islamic symbols, even spread political propaganda through social media. Such campaign strategies contribute to create polarization that occurs in society. This condition exacerbated by the reality that the 2019 presidential election contestation only involved two pairs of candidates, thus making the competition very intense. This polarization looks quite alarming during the campaign period. Even among families, relatives, colleagues, and neighbours, became noisy just because they have different choices. Debates on social media also took place sharply and led to unhealthy conditions. Even more ironic, Islamic populism tends to be part of the politics of dividing citizens and fostering intolerant behaviour.

Our findings in this study indicate that the logic of electoral political winning seems dominant in the mobilization of Islamic populism. At the moment of the campaign, this mobilization used religious sentiments to get voter support. Such religious-based mobilization only invites the sympathy of exclusive supporter segments and difficult to build alliances with broader elements of society because of it tends to be pragmatic. At the same time, this pragmatism also eroded the political legitimacy that it was trying to recreate and maintain during the election moment by holding Ijtima Ulama forum.[]

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