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## Indonesia's New Islamist Politics

**Margaret Scott**  
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Democracy for Sale: Elections, Clientelism, and the State in Indonesia  
by Edward Aspinall and Ward Berenschot  
Cornell University Press, 308 pp., \$95.00; \$32.95 (paper)

After Ahok: The Islamist Agenda in Indonesia  
a report by the Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict  
25 pp., available at [www.understandingconflict.org](http://www.understandingconflict.org)

On April 17 Indonesians will go to the polls to elect a new national government. It is the fifth general election since 1998, when General Suharto was overthrown after thirty-two years of military dictatorship. Indonesia's democracy has survived for two decades, but today it is at risk, facing its own version of the authoritarianism and religious nationalism that threaten so many other societies.

President Joko Widodo, known by everyone as Jokowi since he was elected in 2014, is expected to win a second term.

Five years ago, he ran as a pluralist democrat and as the first leading politician to rise from local, direct elections after the repression and corruption of the Suharto era, known as the New Order. He was praised by President Obama and others as a moderate Muslim leader of a tolerant, Muslim-majority nation that proved that Islam and democracy are compatible.



Adek Berry/AFP/Getty Images

Indonesian president Joko Widodo (right) and his running mate, Ma'ruf Amin, at a peace declaration for the general election campaign, Jakarta, September 2018

But Jokowi has changed, and so has Indonesia. In late 2016 his ally Basuki Purnama Tjahaja, known as Ahok, a Christian and ethnically Chinese politician, was running for governor of Jakarta. That September he said in a speech that people should not be fooled by religious leaders who told them that according to the Koran Muslims couldn't vote for non-Muslims. As a result of his careless comment, an alliance of conservative Muslim leaders, hard-line Islamist vigilantes, and a network of Saudi-influenced preachers accused him of misinterpreting and ridiculing Islam's holy book and organized a series of rallies that were the largest in Indonesia's history. The capital, Jakarta, was flooded with more than 700,000 Muslims demanding that Ahok be charged with blasphemy. In April 2017 he was defeated in the governor's race by Anies Baswedan, a Muslim who had been supported by the protesters. Ahok was convicted of blasphemy and imprisoned for two years. (He was released in January.)

The anti-Ahok movement has transformed Indonesia's politics. Jokowi is again running against Prabowo Subianto, whom he defeated in 2014. A former general and the former son-in-law of Suharto, Prabowo was responsible for the disappearances of pro-democracy activists in the late 1990s and proudly presents himself as a strongman nostalgic for the dictatorship. He championed the anti-Ahok movement, appeared at its rallies, and was seen as a Muslim-nationalist hero by many protesters.

In response to the strength of the Islamists, Jokowi was forced by his coalition of parties to select as his running mate an ultra-conservative Muslim cleric, Ma'ruf Amin, whose fatwa against Ahok had incited the demonstrations. Ma'ruf, a wily seventy-six-year-old ulama (religious leader) and politician, has been a major participant in the battle over the place of Islam in this predominantly Sunni nation.<sup>1</sup> From 2015 until he became Jokowi's choice for vice-president in 2018, he was the head of Indonesia's largest Muslim organization, the enormous, unwieldy Nahdlatul Ulama (NU). The NU, which claims 40 million followers, is often associated with a local version of Islam (sometimes called "Indonesian Islam") that stresses pluralism and tolerance and takes pride in its syncretic blending with local cultures. Ma'ruf comes from the NU's most conservative wing. He wants the state to enforce his puritanical version of piety, which includes restricting the rights of religious minorities as well as criminalizing homosexuality and all sex outside of marriage.

Ma'ruf's improbable trajectory from instigator of the anti-Ahok demonstrations to Jokowi's running mate reflects two trends that are reshaping Indonesia. First, Islamists have gained enormous strength in the fight for religious and political influence, encouraging intolerance, sectarian attitudes, and even violence toward Chinese Indonesians and religious minorities.<sup>2</sup> Second, Islamists are gaining ground in Indonesia's flawed electoral system, which has brought direct elections down to the village level but relies on a corrupt political elite and oligarchs with ties to Suharto's regime.

After Ahok, an extensive study of the rise and influence of Islamists in Indonesia by the Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, a Jakarta-based think tank, goes a long way toward explaining how their movement came together, who was behind it, how a section of the political elite supported it, and how its leaders garnered mass support. It also describes how the movement splintered after Ahok's defeat and conviction yet remains a model for a new kind of political alliance that appeals to the grievances of Indonesians and relies on Islamist networks to mobilize them.

*Democracy for Sale* offers a painstakingly researched examination of the way Indonesia has become a patronage democracy. Edward Aspinall, a longtime Indonesian scholar based at the Australian National University in Canberra, and Ward Berenschot, a veteran of Indonesian studies based in Leiden, spent years exploring how an electoral system that was supposed to promote competition after the dictatorship has become so expensive that only the very rich and corrupt can participate in it. Most candidates finance their own campaigns and often have to pay the political party that backs them. They require elaborate and expensive networks of brokers to get out the vote, relying especially on those who use the widespread tactic known as "dawn attacks," in which voters are given money after dawn prayers. Aspinall and Berenschot's book shows how money has weakened political parties, ensures that personalities matter more than policy, favors incumbents, and almost forces politicians to become corrupt in order to recoup the expense of running for office.

Over time, they write, this dynamic has led to a growing disillusionment with the political system. Polls consistently show that support for democracy is high, hovering around 70 percent, as is voter turnout (69.6 percent in the 2014 election). Yet politicians have steadily lost public trust; party loyalty has plunged from 86 percent in 1999 to 15 percent in 2014. As Aspinall and Berenschot write, patronage politics "do not just feed on social inequality; they also contribute to it by enabling—indeed, requiring—a narrow political class to grow rich through privileged access to state resources." Then they go one step further: "Indonesia's money-infused electoral system increases the chances of authoritarian regression." *Democracy for Sale* helps explain how the anti-Ahok movement used religion to mobilize Muslims resentful over corruption, inequality, and the concentration of wealth among Chinese Indonesians.<sup>3</sup> Its leaders proclaimed that it was a religious movement, but it was also a bid for power.

After Ahok and *Democracy for Sale* show that the rise of conservative Islam and the rise of patronage politics have become toxically intertwined. Ma'ruf's fatwa against Ahok served as the catalyst for a movement long in the making. Conservative Islamist leaders have built on their collusion with powerful politicians since 1998, especially under President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, who served from 2004 to 2014. In 2005 Yudhoyono provided the

opening for Islamists to organize when he declared that the once-toothless national Ulama Council would have the power to settle matters concerning the Islamic faith and that the state would heed its fatwas, which Ma'ruf was in charge of issuing. Since then, he and the council, with state support, have promoted a conservative version of Islam over the various pluralist and pro-democratic versions long embraced by many Indonesians. Jokowi came into office determined to ignore the Islamists and shut off their access to state funds. But they were ready to mobilize when Ahok made his blundering speech.

One of the first to jump in was Muhammad Rizieq Shihab, a former vigilante turned power broker who has opposed Jokowi and Ahok ever since they emerged as reformist, pluralist candidates in Jakarta in 2012. Rizieq got his start in politics after Suharto fell by raiding bars and nightclubs during the fasting month of Ramadan with the backing of elements of the police. As the leader of the Islamic Defenders Front, an Islamist political organization, he went on to incite violence against Ahmadis, members of an Islamic sect that he and others view as heretical, and to attack liberals. Rizieq is a master at provoking moral panic over the supposed rise of neocommunists and gay Indonesians and at invoking fatwas from the Ulama Council to justify his actions.<sup>4</sup>

But it was two Saudi-educated activists and religious leaders, Bachtiar Nasir and Zaitun Rasmin, who gave the movement more sophisticated ideas and an organizational base. They met at the Islamic University of Medina in the 1990s, and since returning to Indonesia they have devoted themselves to spreading a puritanical Islam associated with Saudi Arabia. They call themselves Salafis, but they are a new breed of Salafis who rely on social media—they have hundreds of thousands of followers on Facebook and Instagram—and want to participate in politics, unlike previous generations who espoused political quietism. Bachtiar and Zaitun allied themselves with Rizieq despite their theological differences because they saw Jokowi and Ahok as obstacles to their goal of Muslim control of politics and the economy. In addition to the charge that Ahok had insulted Islam, they turned his candidacy into a symbol of what they claim is the growing threat of ethnic Chinese dominance.

On election night in April 2017, the disparate participants in the anti-Ahok movement—Prabowo, the Salafis, and Rizieq's Islamic Defenders in their white robes—filled Indonesia's largest mosque. Prabowo praised the movement for its part in Ahok's defeat. Then he turned to Rizieq, who was wearing his signature white turban with a flowing tail of fabric, and thanked him "for saving Indonesia's democracy." Many Indonesians saw the widely covered celebration as the beginning of the 2019 presidential campaign.

Jokowi's reelection strategy has been to co-opt some of the Islamists and prosecute others. In the most high-profile case, Rizieq was charged with sending and receiving pornography

on his cell phone. Within weeks of Ahok's defeat, Rizieq fled to Saudi Arabia to avoid charges and has been in exile ever since. He has been weakened, but he still wields enormous influence among voters and uses the Internet and a steady stream of visitors to blast Jokowi as an enemy of Islam, especially for his alleged "criminalizing of the ulama," and he continues to urge his base to back Prabowo.

Prabowo has made the pilgrimage to Mecca to be photographed with Rizieq, whose support he is happy to have. While campaigning in late February, Prabowo told an exuberant crowd, "If I win, I will return Habib Rizieq Shihab. I will send my private jet to pick him up. He's been slandered and victimized."

Prabowo's relationship with Rizieq illustrates the alliance between the elite and Islamists as well as the contradictions in Prabowo's political persona. He comes from an aristocratic Javanese family; his father was a famous economist who became associated with Suharto's drive to be the "father of development." His mother was a Christian and so are his three siblings and his nephew. Prabowo joined the military, rose quickly in the New Order elite, and even married the dictator's daughter in a lavish Muslim ceremony (they had a son and later divorced after Suharto fell).

Around the time Prabowo was offering his private jet to Rizieq, I was in Jakarta, where I met with some of his campaign advisers, including his debonair nephew Tommy Djiwandono, who is the campaign and party treasurer. Wearing a monogrammed dress shirt, dark cotton trousers, and suede loafers with tassels, Djiwandono was the last to arrive in the private room at an upscale Japanese restaurant. He immediately told me that the election is all about the economy, jobs, and prices, not religion. "There are so many misperceptions of what is going on. There is no way Indonesia is turning into an Islamic state," he said. "The Islamic problem is overblown. I should know: I'm a minority and I know Prabowo is a nationalist who will protect minorities."

Prabowo's speechwriter, a twenty-nine-year-old who left McKinsey to work for him, jumped in and said he was sick of talking about Islam: "The press are obsessed with it; people aren't." Djiwandono shook his head: "No, we have to talk about it." He said that Prabowo is close to people like Rizieq because they have been marginalized. "He engages them, and he has been doing it for a long time, and he knows how to control them."

"Yes, there is right-wing influence coming in from the Middle East, but we still have a window," Djiwandono said. "Middle East influence grows because of need. If there are jobs, then people are not susceptible." Djiwandono then nodded to his colleagues and said, "Take his driver, take my driver, give them a future that will allow them to say no to extremism." He ended with his vision of Prabowo uniting all the nationalists in a new

alliance: “Give us two or three election cycles to make the nationalist powerful and then Islamism will decrease.”

After Ahok argues that Bachtiar Nasir and Zaitun Rasmin will have a more substantive and lasting impact on Indonesia's politics than Rizieq. Prabowo's nephew may consider them a fleeting example of Middle Eastern influence, but the puritanical Islam they follow has deep roots and is now part of Indonesia's religious landscape.<sup>5</sup> During my stay in Jakarta I watched Zaitun deliver the Friday sermon in one of the glass skyscrapers in the Kuningan section of the city. He asked me to sit in the back of the twentieth-floor prayer room since I'm a woman. Scores and scores of young men, office employees and bank workers, placed their shoes on racks and staked out a spot. Zaitun and Bachtiar spend most Fridays in such prayer rooms, giving sermons to the aspiring middle class, which is their target audience.

After the sermon, we sat in the lobby as one of Zaitun's assistants recorded our talk. Zaitun is tall and thin with a long, narrow face, a mustache, and a straggly goatee. He told me that he now loves to talk about democracy, though for many years he rejected it, since he thought it put man-made laws above God's laws. The anti-Ahok movement has shown him that democracy can be good for Muslims. “We are the majority so we need to run the country,” he said. That message has resonated with many Indonesians and has led to more invitations for Friday sermons and TV appearances than he can handle. He says he always tells his audiences that Muslims should not vote for non-Muslims. “We are Muslims, and we want a Muslim leader. That's democracy.”

Zaitun and Bachtiar, according to *After Ahok*, have clear long-term objectives: a greater public role for ulama, sharia-inspired public policies, Muslim-majority rule, and Muslim control of the economy. Yet as a result of Jokowi's prosecutions of Rizieq and other Islamists, they are careful to avoid calling for the formal application of Islamic law or an Islamic state. *After Ahok* describes their aspirations as the gradual Islamization of Indonesia, akin to what Bachtiar's role model, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has done in Turkey. Bachtiar and Zaitun want to claim supremacy for their narrowly defined, anti-pluralist, and deeply contested version of Islam and to have it replace the rich variety of Islam in Indonesia. Bachtiar, in an interview included in *After Ahok*, said, “Islam accepts democracy but the question is, does democracy accept Islam? We're the majority, therefore according to democratic principles, we should be the ones who determine the law.”

Zaitun and Bachtiar do not wear the typical Salafi clothes of sandals and linen pants that fall above the ankles; they wear collarless batik shirts and a black peci, the distinctively Indonesian round cap. They are determined to claim that they represent mainstream Islam,

thereby moving the definition of moderate Islam to the right and the definition of democracy to majoritarianism.

Jokowi faces a thorny but familiar predicament: How does a democracy respond to antidemocratic challengers? For Jokowi, who is from central Java and follows a relaxed, tolerant form of Islam, having Ma'ruf as his running mate offers a shield against his opponents' claims that he is an enemy of Islam. But he has done much more than polish his Muslim credentials. As though taking cues from practices described in *Democracy for Sale*, Jokowi has showered Ma'ruf with state resources: a government micro-credit bank program was launched by Jokowi at Ma'ruf's pesantren (Islamic boarding school), and Ma'ruf was appointed to a presidential task force and assured that he would benefit from a new land distribution program. Jokowi also cracked down on and then banned Hizbut Tahrir, an Islamist organization that rejects violence and jihadism but wants to create a caliphate. His government has targeted Muslim preachers from Prabowo's camp, bringing dubious charges of defamation and hate speech. Anti-Jokowi demonstrations have been stopped by the police. Jokowi's use of the police and state bureaucracy to co-opt or silence his critics has stunned many of his supporters and has become a major theme of the election.

This turn to authoritarian tactics by the Jokowi government is one of the troubling long-term impacts of the anti-Ahok movement on Indonesia's democracy. But equally troubling is the measurable effect the movement has had on the attitudes of Indonesian Muslims. Marcus Mietzner, a professor at the Australian National University, and Burhanuddin Muhtadi, the executive director of a Jakarta-based survey institute, examined data from polls, including ones they devised, that were conducted before, during, and after the anti-Ahok mobilizations.<sup>6</sup> They found that before the movement started, exclusivist and intolerant attitudes were declining, but they began increasing after the protests, especially on the central demand of the anti-Ahok movement that non-Muslims be excluded from political office.

Before the protests, in 2016, an average of 42.3 percent of Muslims objected to non-Muslims holding office, according to their data. In 2017, in the midst of the movement, that percentage rose to 49.6 percent. And by 2018, 54.6 percent of Muslims objected to



A post from Zaitun Rasmin's Facebook page showing Rizieq Shihab (left), Bachtiar Nasir (center), and Rasmin (right), December 2018. The text in the upper right reads, 'Scholars maintain the Muslim community.'

non-Muslims in office. When asked about having a non-Muslim president, 47.9 percent objected in 2016; by 2018, 59.1 percent objected. Mietzner and Muhtadi conclude that the anti-Ahok movement inflamed intolerance rather than reflecting it. “This highlights the role of religio-political entrepreneurs in using the existing baseline of intolerance to ignite the protests and consolidate religious exclusivism further in their aftermath,” they write.

If, as expected, Jokowi and Ma'ruf are elected, the new vice-president will exemplify how the anti-Ahok campaign is forcing Jokowi to redefine his relationship with political Islam. His choice of Ma'ruf as his running mate was intended to divide the Islamists' support of Prabowo. It has also helped unify Nahdlatul Ulama behind Jokowi. The NU was riven by the anti-Ahok mobilizations, with Ma'ruf cheering on the protests while most NU leaders pleaded with their followers not to participate. After Ahok's defeat, many NU leaders determined that the organization's survival was under threat, especially if Prabowo and his conservative Islamist backers were to win the 2019 election. To prevent this, they pushed for a bargain in which they would support Jokowi in exchange for Ma'ruf's being made the vice-presidential candidate.

This is a gamble for both the NU and Jokowi. For the NU, the bargain promises a flow of state support, further entangling it in the patronage politics described in *Democracy for Sale*. For Jokowi, the NU offers a huge pool of voters, especially on Java, where more than half the population lives. This bargain also means that during Jokowi's second term, the state may promote the NU's version of Islam. As president, Yudhoyono supported the Ulama Council's exclusivist, conservative Islam; now it will be the NU's turn to enlist the state in the project of defining Islam.

Yahya Cholil Staquf, the secretary-general of the NU's Religious Advisory Board, told me that Jokowi and the NU's version of Islam must win. For Yahya, this is both a national and global conflict, which he views as between Indonesian Islam and Middle Eastern Islam. He opposed Ma'ruf's backing of the anti-Ahok movement but pushed for him to be on the ticket, both as a way to control him and as a way to ensure that Jokowi supports the NU in its fight against Rizieq and the Salafis. “We know that NU has to fight back, and so we need to provide reasons for why Indonesian Islam is worth fighting for,” he said. “Islamists must be marginalized. We can never accept them in a democracy.”

One afternoon I visited a group of social media-savvy supporters of Jokowi, including Nong Mahmada, who has been a liberal activist since she was part of the student movement that took over parliament in 1998 and demanded Suharto's resignation. Over the years, she has railed against the Islamization of politics. But this campaign is different, she said: “We have to fight back with Islam; it is the only way to win. Prabowo claims he is a better Muslim than Jokowi, and we are fighting back to show that's not true.” Every

Friday, for instance, her group posts a meme with the hashtag “Where did Prabowo perform the Friday prayer?,” designed to show that he is not all that pious. It has an enormous following. “We are fighting for our Islam, our Indonesian Islam, and we need Jokowi,” Nong said. “It is win or die, so we have to do whatever it takes.”

In battling his opponents, Jokowi has turned to religion and the powers of incumbency. He and many of his supporters have chosen to fight one version of Islam with another, which means that the Islamists may achieve their goal of religion becoming more important in Indonesia than equality. If that happens, Jokowi, who entered office promising support for human rights and protections for religious and ethnic minorities, may wind up destroying the democracy that so many Indonesians hoped he would preserve.<sup>n</sup>

—March 20, 2019

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- 1 Muslims make up 87.2 percent of the population (240 million people as of 2010), Christians 9.9 percent, Hindus 1.7 percent, others (including Buddhists and Confucians) 0.9 percent, and 0.4 percent are unspecified. It is illegal to be an atheist in Indonesia. ↵
  - 2 See my “Indonesia: The Battle Over Islam” in these pages, May 26, 2016. ↵
  - 3 Chinese Indonesians make up about 3 percent of the population, yet they have an outsize role and own well over half of the private economy. ↵
  - 4 See Ian Wilson, *The Politics of Protection Rackets in Post–New Order Indonesia: Coercive Capital, Authority and Street Politics* (Routledge, 2015). ↵
  - 5 See my “Indonesia: The Saudis are Coming” in these pages, October 27, 2016. ↵
  - 6 See Mietzner and Muhtadi, “The Mobilization of Intolerance and Its Trajectories: Indonesian Muslims’ Views of Religious Minorities and Ethnic Chinese,” in *Contentious Belonging: The Place of Minorities in Indonesia*, edited by Greg Fealy and Ronit Ricci (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, forthcoming, 2019). ↵

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