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RELIGION AND POLITICS: THE ROLE OF ISLAM IN INDONESIA'S 2024 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

RELIGIÓN Y POLÍTICA: EL ROL DEL ISLAM EN LAS ELECCIONES PRESIDENCIALES DE 2024 EN INDONESIA

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Sebastian Sterzer

r 🛡

Universidad Nacional de Luján sterzersebastian@gmail.com

Philips Apriadi Wijaya Duniversitas Pamulang philipswijaya14@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT: The link between religion and the State remains a highly contentious issue in Indonesia, concerning mainly the role of Islam within the scope of the Republic. Since the country's democratization, electoral and party politics have been increasingly characterized by the divide between religious conservatism and more secular views on public life. These tendencies have become more dominant under the current presidency of Joko Widodo and will certainly be pressing issues in the upcoming presidential election. This paper analyses the relationship between religion and politics ahead of the 2024 presidential election in Indonesia. The first part provides a historical description of the emergence of Muslim organizations and political parties and their complex relationship with the national government. The second part analysis de rise of Islamist movements and their weight on national elections. Finally, the third part considers the prospects and challenges of future candidates to the 2024 presidential election.

KEYWORDS: Politics, Islam, Indonesia, elections, organizations

RESUMEN: El vínculo entre religión y Estado sigue siendo una cuestión controvertida en Indonesia, involucrando el rol del Islam en el marco de la República. Desde la democratización del país, la política electoral y partidaria se ha caracterizado crecientemente por la división entre

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conservadurismo religioso y visiones más seculares de la vida pública. Estas tendencias se han vuelto más dominantes bajo la actual presidencia de Joko Widodo y sin duda serán cuestiones apremiantes en la próxima elección presidencial. Este artículo analiza el vínculo entre religión y política de cara a las elecciones presidenciales de 2024 en Indonesia. La primera parte provee una descripción histórica de la emergencia de organizaciones y partidos musulmanes y su compleja relación con el gobierno nacional. La segunda parte analiza el ascenso de movimientos islamistas y su peso en las elecciones nacionales. Finalmente, la tercera parte considera las perspectivas y desafíos de futuros candidatos de la elección presidencial de 2024.

PALABRAS CLAVE: política, Islam, Indonesia, elecciones, organizaciones

Introduction

The link between religion and the State remains a highly contentious issue in Indonesia, concerning mainly the role of Islam within the scope of the Republic (Wahid, 2019). As the largest archipelagic country in the world, Indonesia is home to various ethnic groups, languages, and religions.

Its people are known for their high levels of tolerance and mutual respect, so it is undeniable that not only Islam but also other religions like Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism are heavily involved in political activities. Nevertheless, the relative autonomy of politics and the State has been a source of tension in a country with the largest Muslim population in the world (approximately 87% of the total).

Since the country's democratization, electoral and party politics have been increasingly characterized by the divide between religious conservatism and more secular views on public life. Despite Islam not being the State religion, Muslim votes are crucial in electoral outcomes, and political elites have weaponized religious cleavages to achieve their goals.

These tendencies have become more dominant under the current presidency of Joko Widodo and will certainly be pressing issues in the upcoming presidential election of 2024 (Setiawan et al., 2020).

This paper analyses the relationship between religion and politics ahead of the 2024 presidential election in Indonesia. The first part provides a historical description of the emergence of Muslim organizations and political parties and their complex relationship with the national government.

The second part analysis de rise of Islamist movements and their weight on national elections. Finally, the third part considers the prospects and challenges of future candidates to the 2024 presidential election.

The historical relationship between politics and Islam in modern-day Indonesia

Since the rise of nationalism in Indonesia in the early 20th century, Islam has been the basis for mobilizing political support. It was a forced to be reckoned with, both by the Dutch colonial authorities and later by the central government after the independence.

Among Muslim academics, the contentious nature of this relationship finds expression in at least three strands of political thought. A first school, represented by figures such as Hasan al-Banna, Sayyid Qutb, Rasyid Ridha and Abu al-A'la al-Maududi, regards Islam as a complete religion that covers matters of the State.

From an opposing view, the second school associated to Ali Abd Raziq and Thaha Husein separates religion and the State. Finally, the third school embodied by Muhammad Husein Haikal sits in a middle ground, rejecting both the notion that Islam encompasses everything and the view that it only regulates the relationship between humans and their Creator.

Even though Islam does not cover everything, it teaches a set of principles and ethical values regarding social life that Muslims must develop and implement.

What needs to be underlined is that, historically, the development of Islamic schools of thought in pre-independence Indonesia referred to the first and the third school. The first is represented in the narrative of religious life in Aceh, West Sumatra, South Sulawesi, and various areas on the island of Java. Eventually, religious fanatism penetrated political doctrine in a way that would sustain a wave of popular resistance against the Dutch colonial government (Adiwilaga, 2019).

In the aftermath of the independence, Islam tended to be regarded as extreme and unsupportive of the *Pancasila* ideology. Controversy arose in the writing and reform of the constitution whenever Islam or the concept of *Pancasilla* were involved.

The latter is enshrined in the Preamble of the 1945 Indonesian Constitution and comprises five abstract principles: (1) belief in a single Almighty God; (2) just and civilized humanity; (3) the unity of Indonesia; (4) democracy guided by the wisdom of deliberations among representatives; and (5) social justice. Therefore, *Pancasila* serves as moral orientation for the nation's modern-day democracy (Adnan & Amaliyah, 2021).

In Soekarno's view, the first President of the Republic, political parties could carry out their role in accordance with the religious values of the nation

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without deviation from the *Pancasila* ideology. Interestingly, even though the constitution has no requirements for presidential candidates regarding religion, all candidates have come from Muslim backgrounds (Harruma, 2022).

In practice, there are many political parties that adhere to religious values. Several of these are officially recognized in Indonesia and apply religious values in accordance with the principles of the *Pancasila* ideology. Some of these include the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP), National Awakening Party (PKB), Party of Work Group (GOLKAR), Great Indonesia Movement Party (GERINDRA), NASDEM Party, National Awakening Party (PKB), National Mandate Party (PAN), United Development Party (PPP), Democratic Party (PD) and Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) (Setiawan et al., 2020).

Among these, the largest Islamic parties are the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) and the National Awakening Party (PKB). Founded in 1998, PKS originated as a Muslim student movement, deriving its founding members from the Indonesian Muslim Student Action Union (KAMMI). PKS officials have confirmed that the South Jakarta-based party, was inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood and the works of Hasan al-Banna.

As an Islamic party, PKS has a regeneration system that is different from secular parties. For example, the party requires its cadres to read the *shahada* or take the oath as party members (Rahman, 2023).

On the other side, Indonesia's National Awakening Party or *Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa* (PKB) was founded in July 1998 in Jakarta at the residence of Abdurrahman Wahid ("Gus Dur"), Indonesia's first democratically elected president in 1999. However, PKS and PKB are not the only parties with a predominantly Muslim following. With the expansion of pan-Islamism worldwide, movements for the renewal of a more moderate Islamic thought began to appear in the archipelago after the birth of organizations such as Muhammadiyah, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), and particularly, Syarikat Islam (SI).

This last one was a pioneer among Islamic organizations and gave birth to spin offs that eventually became quite influential political movements such as Masyumi and the Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI).

These organizations are quite different to the now-banned Hizbut Tahrir (HTI), which supports the establishment of a caliphate and the adoption of *Syariah* (Islamic law) as positive law in Indonesia. As part of the same movement for Hizbut Tahrir that emerged in the Middle East (Lebanon), the one in Indonesia was founded by Taqiyuddin An Nabhani.

The appeal of HT's ideology to Indonesian Muslims lies in its emphasis on the urgency to engage the Muslim community to internalize the Islamic way of life, as opposed to focusing solely on Islamizing the State. HTI has been officially banned as an organization since 2017, but its activists and followers maintain their ideology of promoting the *Khilafah* (Islamic government).

At first, ideological differences between the NU and Muhammadiyah revolved around who represents true Islam. NU embodies traditionalist Islam that is more accepting of local practices, such as visiting graves by pious Muslims, celebrating the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad (*maulid*), and communal prayers for the dead (*tahlilan*); all of this is frowned upon by the modernist-oriented Muhammadiyah (Al-Ansi et al., 2019; Burhani, 2020; Burhani & Yew-Foong, 2019; Saat, 2021).

Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama are not political parties, but they play a significant role in shaping Indonesian politics. The first political party formed by the two organizations was named *Masyumi* to defend the identity of Islam in Indonesia during colonial times (Wahid, 2019). Members of both organizations lead Islamic parties and participate in many national parties where they have important roles in legislative, presidential, and local elections.

During the presidencies of Soekarno (1945-67) and Suharto (1967-1998), their policies related to Muslim movements were modeled after various ones implemented by the Dutch until the late mid-19th century, which were characterized by the distinction between religious and political aspects of Islam (tolerating religious aspects and suppressing political ones). By following the same mindset, bureaucrats and military elites suppressed the political power of Islamic parties (Adnan & Amaliyah, 2021; Wahid, 2019).

In 1975, Suharto formed the *Majelis Ulama Council* (Indonesian Ulama Council, MUI), envisioning it as a national body of Islamic scholars (*ulama*) issuing *fatwas* and recommendations (Islamic rulings and legal opinions) (Nopriansyah, 2019).

However, the underlying political consideration for its formation was to appease conservative sectors displeased by the secularizing and developmental approach of the government and the marginalization of the public role of Islam (Brown, 2003).

Suharto also wanted to test the powers of NU, the most prominent Islamic political party at the time. By forming MUI, he intended to create the impression that his regime was not anti-Islam.

Saat (2015) claims that Suharto considered domestic circumstances and social divisions when responding to the Islamic revival. He did so in three ways: by integrating all Islamic political parties in the United Development Party (PPP); coalescing religious scholars in the Ulama Council of Indonesia (MUI); and uniting intellectuals in the Indonesian Association of Muslim Intellectuals (ICMI). The author argues this was a strategy to internally fragment the Muslim political leadership.

MUI's stature was not strong during its formative years. Throughout the Suharto regime, although it was never part of the state apparatus, the Council received financial assistance from the government. Because of this, observers considered it part of the New Order government. MUI's critics,

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however, have tended to gloss over instances where it clashed with the Suharto regime. Sometimes, its *fatwas* differed from Suharto's visions and policies.

An example of this was MUI's declaration of Ahmadiyah as deviant. Similarly, MUI stated that Shiites do not represent mainstream Islam, urging Indonesian Muslims to consider theological differences between Sunnis and Shiites. Interestingly, during the New Order period, NU only held the MUI presidency for three years under Syukri Ghozali from 1981 to 1984. Suharto was feeling more aligned with Muhammadiyah because of their modernist orientation, apart from perceiving NU's followers as a threat (Saat, 2015).

Presidents after Suharto grew more comfortable with the NU and have tried to take advantage of the organization's large following (Saat, 2021).

Saat (2021) argues that during the Suharto era, MUI successfully adapted by acting as a gatekeeper to the government (*khadim al-hukuma*). After losing its main political patronage with Suharto's resignation in 1998, MUI quickly adapted to the new situation, changing its slogan from *khadim al-hukuma* to *khadim al-umma* (guardian of the Muslim community).

The author recalls that during the Abdurrahman Wahid era (1999-2001), the Council faced serious challenges from this president who was himself an *ulema* (doctor of Muslim religious and legal disciplines), meaning that it could not argue with Wahid on Islamic issues without having strong backing for its claims.

In 2001, tensions arose with the government regarding the *halality* (validity of the product to be consumed by Muslims) of the Japanese brand food seasoning Ajinomoto, in response to claims that it contained pork enzymes (the consumption of pork is prohibited in Islam). The tension was between two NU figures: Sahal Mahfudz, then president of MUI, and President Wahid. The government approved consumption while MUI opposed, calling for the product to be withdrawn.

After some time, Wahid proposed a reform of MUI, but despite the challenges that it had to face during this period, the Council managed to maintain its position with the government.

In the era of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (2004-2014), MUI was able to expand its influence in the government and the Muslim community. For the first time, the Council was recognized by the president as the *aqidah police* (faith police) and as the moral police. This allowed it to become very dominant in matters of religion, especially the use of Islam as a standard for public behavior (Nopriansyah, 2019).

MUI also managed to issue and revitalize 14 *fatwas* that encouraged intolerance and discrimination towards minorities. One of these involved the ban on Ahmadiyyah, a minority Islamic sect, from spreading its teachings which were disregarded by political Islamist as deviated from mainstream Islam.

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In the current climate, any wrongdoing, intentional or not, on the part of Muslims or non-Muslims can be construed as acts intended to disturb religious harmony. Nearly all Muslims in Indonesia are Sunni, the world's largest branch of Islam, while other minority Islamist sects, such as Shiites and Ahmadiyya, face resistance from political Islamists.

Currently, two laws allow for the possibility of discrimination against non-Muslims, non-Sunni Muslims, and other minority religions: the Blasphemy Law of 1965 and the Religious Harmony Regulation of 2006. These two laws branch out into many oppressive regulations, giving the majority veto power over minorities. According to the Blasphemy Law, only six religions are explicitly mentioned and protected: Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Confucianism, leading many to misconstrue that Indonesia only recognizes six religions. Anyone convicted of breaking the law faces up to five years in prison (Arman, 2022).

Since the issuing of the decree under the Blasphemy Law, Ahmadiyyah has been subject to several attacks over the past 15 years. Yudhoyono intentionally recruited Kyai Ma'ruf Amin, already a key figure in MUI (and current Vice President of Indonesia), as a member of Wantimpres (*Dewan Pertimbangan Presiden*, or Chairman of the Advisory Council).

That position made MUI stronger than ever and allowed the organization to consolidate its strength throughout Yudhoyono's presidency (Hasyim, 2021). While many have emphasized its political and religious role, MUI in fact had a broader project, namely pushing for *shariatization* and ensuring its role in the *halal* certification process, a lucrative business, and Islamic banking and finance (Saat, 2021).

Weaponization of religious sentiment in electoral politics

The revival of political Islam is a logical consequence of democratization. A major aspect of this during the reform era is the rise of ultraconservative and extremist Islamism, which had previously expanded under the effects of multiple factors such as the Cold War, the emergence of Masyumi, the Iranian Revolution of 1979, and Suharto's pro-Western policies.

The collapse of Suharto's government gave way to the proliferation of movements rhetorically denouncing Western influence (democracy, capitalism, liberalism, and secularism) and pushing for Islamic law (Al Qurtuby; 2020; Fossati, 2023). These movements include the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTT), the Indonesian Mujahidin Council (MMI), the Tarbiyah Movement with its PKS, and the Ahlus Sunnah wal Jamaah Communication Forum with its Laskar Jihad (Adnan & Amaliyah, 2021; Carnegie, 2008).

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At the time, the establishment of Islamic parties like PKS was heavily debated. Nevertheless, the inclusion of these parties was considered legal and constitutional in the context of the newly founded democratic system, so long as their goals did not conflict with the pillars of the State and democracy. Although support for such parties was quite strong in the early stages of the reformation era, it gradually weakened, as seen in the results of the 1999, 2004 and 2009 general elections (Abdillah, 2011).

Some analysts argue many Muslims prefer nationalist parties, such as the PDI-P, the Democratic Party, the NASDEM Party, and GOLKAR (Rachman, 2019). With that in mind, it is worth bringing Maruf Amin's words (the current vice-president) when in 2017 he was a leader in NU: "This country is considered a darul abdi (state of agreement). Not darul (state) of Islam, not darul kufri (infidels), not darul harbi (war), but a country of agreement." (Hakim, 2017).

However, contemporary political scholars and researchers now assess that Islamic groups have strong enough bargaining power in political disputes as a product of electoral democracy. Muslim votes are crucial, and the political elite have increasingly weaponized Islam to achieve their goals (Suryadinata, 2017). During the 2014 presidential election, Joko Widodo was well ahead of his rival Prabowo Subianto in the opinion polls, yet nearly lost the race due to a smear campaign portraying him as a "Chinese Christian" (Suryadinata, 2017). Since then, Widodo has been plagued by accusations of lacking faith and religious values.

Furthermore, PKS has consistently been part of the coalition of opposition parties to the government in the House of Representatives (*Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat*, DPR). Alongside the Democratic Party, the two control approximately 18% of the seats in the legislature. Apart from participating in elections, it has also been consistently involved in the presidential election as the supporting party to Jokowi's rivals, as it did in 2019 backing Prabowo Subianto and Sandiaga Uno (Rahman, 2023).

MUI's position changed once again after Jokowi became president. Before his victory, he was not a national figure and had no prior experience dealing with MUI. Jokowi was the mayor of Surakarta and MUI, as an organization, did not have significant influence at the subnational or regional level. Even after being elected Governor of Jakarta in 2012, Jokowi remained mostly unaware of MUI.

Furthermore, some statements released by the organization during the 2012 Jakarta gubernatorial election were against Jokowi's candidacy, largely based on his choice of political allies. Jokowi was then supported by secular parties like PDIP and Gerindra and had Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok), a Christian and Chinese, as his running mate.

During the 2014 presidential election, it maintained a neutral position, probably due to Jusuf Jakkam beign Jokowi's running mate, a person long

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acquainted with MUI leaders such as Ma'ruf Amin and Din Syamsuddin. The Council did not manifest any open support for Jokowi, and in fact, some members of its elite expressed support for Prabowo. In this sense, Hasyim (2020; 2021) points out Jokowi's first year policies as president that had a direct impact on MUI. For instance, the Council had benefited in the past from block grants provided by the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MORA). However, Jokowi's new financial policy left MUI's subsidies pending, enraging its leaders.

Under the current Jokowi presidency, MUI remains under the control of the Conservatives, meaning those who reigned under Ma'ruf's presidency continue to run the institution. Jokowi's only tool to keep them under control is through the appointment of the Minister of Religion. Saat (2021) argues that the minister holds the key to financial resources and can modify policies that undermine the authority of MUI.

In the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election, the then very popular incumbent governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama alias Ahok, a Christian of Chinese ascent, decided to contest the election. To disqualify him from running in the elections, his opponents accused him of blaspheming Islam by referring to a verse from the Qur'an in one of his campaign speeches. The comments, caught on video and quickly viralized via YouTube, denounced the use of those verses by Islamic leaders to mislead voters into thinking Muslims should not vote a non-Muslim leader. This sparked outrage among religious hardliners and political Islamists (Arman, 2022) like FPI, who organized demonstrations urging Ahok to be arrested and removed from his post as governor. Two large "Islamic" demonstrations in Jakarta, on late 2016, resulted in Ahok's indictment as a suspect in the blasphemy case (Al Qurtuby, 2020).

Most accounts of the 2017 election focus on the mobilization of religious sentiment against Ahok, highlighting the importance of religion and religious sentiment in electoral politics. Three reasons support this election account. The first relates to the fact that Ahok was the only non-Muslim on the ballot, an issue that was bound to ignite controversy. The second comes from surveys revealing the weight of religious similarity in voting behavior. A study conducted by the Indonesian Survey Circle (Lingkaran Survey Indonesia) found that 71% of those surveyed considered it important to elect a governor who shares their faith.

The third and final reason relates to the blasphemy case against Ahok (Sumaktoyo, 2021). Ma'ruf Amin, the president of MUI, and Bachtiar Nasir, a member of its board, became crucial in mobilizing the protesters. Ma'ruf was later named as a key witness during Ahok's trial as well, and the former Governor of Jakarta was subsequently imprisoned. Among conservatives, the role of MUI leaders in the protests boosted the organization's image as "defender of Islam." This also signaled to the political elites that MUI was a force to be reckoned with (Saat, 2021).

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The 2019 presidential election has been no exception in the Islam-political dynamic, and this is evident in the way the two pairs of presidential candidates, Joko Widodo-Ma'ruf Amin and Prabowo Subianto-Sandiaga Uno, did everything in their power to present themselves as representatives of Islamic groups. The careful choice of vice-president and the contributions of both moderate and militant Islamic groups were equally important to gain voter support (Adiwilaga, 2019).

In this regard, Joko Widodo nominated Amin, a conservative cleric, as his vice-presidential candidate. This not only strengthened the impression that Widodo is not anti-*ulama*, but also placed Nahdlatul Ulama firmly behind his reelection bid. For this organization, the election was not simply a matter of choosing a president, but an ideological war to protect Sunni Islam (as interpreted by them). Believing that former HTI members have been supporting the Subianto-Uno camp, Nadhlatul Ulama leaders mobilized their members in support of the Widodo-Amin team to defend their ideological position (Arifianto, 2021 & 2022). On the other hand, Muhammadiyah has taken the official position of not supporting either candidate.

Despite these efforts, Jokowi faced fierce opposition from other religious groups. For instance, FPI leader and supporter of *Sharia*, Muhammad Rizieq Syihab, declared in December 2018 that it is "*haram*" (forbidden) to vote for a presidential candidate (Widodo) associated with Ahok. Rizieq's perspective on Islam and the State is quite ambiguous: he accepts *Pancasila*, the state declaration that promotes pluralism, only if "the interpretation of Pancasila remains in line with Islam" (Suryana & Taufek, 2021).

This left Jokowi with no choice but to consider a conservative cleric to win over conservative Muslim (Muhtadi & Muslim, 2021; Saat, 2021). Furthermore, the weight of religion on the careful consideration of political allies is evident even after the election. Having succeeded in his reelection, Jokowi chose his former rival Prabowo as his Defence Minister. With this decision, Prabowo seemed to cut his ties with some Islamists (Supriatma, 2020). Also, Sandiaga Uno joined the government as the Minister of Creative Economy and Tourism.

What the 2024 elections may bring

The upcoming 2024 presidential election raises questions concerning the intensity of Islamic populism among voters. Will religious sentiments play such a central role as they did during the 2019 election? Current polls reveal that the two strongest candidates are Widodo's allies, the governor of Central Java province, Ganjar Pranowo, and Anies Baswedan, the former governor of Jakarta. The latter has found his political groove as the candidate of more conservative Muslims. If Ganjar and Anies prevail as the leading candidates, a

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contest between them could quickly unearth latent cultural and religious conflicts, with Islamists lining up behind Anies, and pluralists and religious minorities flocking to Ganjar (Adiwilaga, 2019; Muhtadi & Muslim, 2021). Everybody else —including Prabowo, if he too secures a candidacy— would be stuck in the middle, being told by ideologues on both sides that mistake is not an option. Some experts even fear that what could start as a relatively civil contest could rapidly turn nasty (Lane, 2021; Simandjuntak, 2022).

The authors of this paper agree with Simandjuntak (2022) about the prospects of the duo comprising Ganjar and Erick Thohir, because latter is a young and highly successful entrepreneur, thus popular among millennial voters. Apart from that, Erick could also attract moderate Muslim votes. Ucu (2023) writes that the ruling PDI Perjuanganwants wants the presidential and vice-presidential candidates to represent the national religion, as well as someone closer to the NU.

Therefore, Erick Thohir's candidacy as vice-president to Ganjar is viable because he is a neutral figure that has never practiced identity politics. Furthermore, the fact that he is from outside of Java could potentially help increase Ganjar's vote share.

The opposition camp might field Anies Baswedan, mostly for his popularity among conservative Islamic voters. But it is unclear if this voting bloc will be as strong as in 2019 after the government banned the firebrand Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) in 2020. Experts say Anies will likely still need some votes from moderate Muslims, yet this is difficult due to his conservative image (Muhtadi & Muslim, 2021; Simandjuntak, 2022).

The relative absence of party ideology has made individual candidates and public perception of their "religiosity" the focus of mobilization. However, the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) has decided to nominate Anies Baswedan as its presidential candidate in the 2024 elections. PKS is also the first Islamic-based party to support the former Governor of DKI Jakarta (Rahman, 2023).

Conclusion

This paper argues that religion is crucial to the political development of Indonesia. Islam and politics cannot be separate because most Indonesians are Muslims and uphold Islamic values in their daily lives. In political activities, these values are prevalent and many officially recognized parties adhere to Muslim principles. Politics, then, have permeated within the Islamic community.

Ahead of the next presidential election, the debate will be increasingly intense about which candidate represents the most orthodox interests of Islam, and which one is the most heterodox. In the short term, this will be decisive in electing the next president and even at the regional level with the governors.

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Nevertheless, it cannot be ignored that, perhaps in the long term, these debates will lead to frictions in the Muslim community (and non-Muslims as well). In a country that is vast in terms of population and geography, the relevance of this possibility cannot be stressed enough.

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