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Political Islam in Indonesia: Impact of Current Israel-Hamas War in Gaza

By Irman G. Lanti

SYNOPSIS

The war between Israel and Hamas that began on 7 October 2023 has produced tensions in many parts of the world. In Muslim countries, national leaders have been urged to render assistance to the besieged Palestinians in Gaza. As is often the case, national responses will be shaped or dictated by local contexts. In Indonesia, the many public demonstrations of wide appeal that took place over the past few weeks in support of the Palestinians should be seen in the context of the 2024 Presidential Election and the implications for Jakarta's eventual foreign policy and role in ASEAN.

COMMENTARY

The 2019 Indonesian Presidential Election is considered one of the most divisive elections in the history of the nation. It saw a repeat of the previous election, in which the nationalist incumbent President Joko Widodo (popularly known as Jokowi) ran against Prabowo Subianto, who was a favourite with many conservative Muslim voters.

While the election saw a general increase of vote share for Jokowi, Prabowo was able to increase his share in traditionally Islamic provinces, such as those in Sumatra, West Java, and South Sulawesi, thereby widening the gulf between the nationalists and conservative Muslims even further.

Managing the Challenge from Conservative Muslims

Jokowi dealt with this by adopting a combination of suppression and appeasement strategies towards the opposition. His administration banned two major radical Islamic organisations, the Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) and the Front Pembela Islam (FPI) and jailed some of their leaders. At the same time, a number of right-wing clerics, such

as Ali Mochtar Ngabalin, a former member of Partai Bulan Bintang (PBB, Crescent Star Party), and Kapitra Ampera, the former lawyer of FPI's Habib Rizieq Shihab, were invited to join the government in various capacities.

These strategies were reinforced by the provision of substantial support to the traditionalist Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), an Islamic organisation with more than 21 million members. In addition to appointing Ma'ruf Amin, a leading NU figure as the Vice President of Indonesia, Jokowi's administration provided many government posts for his fellow activists. This paved the way for the dominance of NU-leaning officials in the Ministry of Religious Affairs, while sidelining many modernist bureaucrats who leaned towards the other major Indonesian Muslim organisation – the Muhammadiyah. There were reports that applicants for senior government posts were screened if they had been involved with radical Islamic organisations or clerics.

These strategies have proven quite effective in stemming the growth of Islamism in Indonesia, even rolling back some of the achievements that the conservative Muslim bodies had achieved before Jokowi's administration. However, the political Muslims are used to this kind of oppression, having had to endure it for more than forty years under Sukarno's Guided Democracy and Suharto's New Order regimes. They might not appear to be active, but they are waiting for opportunities to surface when circumstances turned favourable.

Support for Palestine and Indonesia's 2024 Election

During the past few weeks, public demonstrations expressing support for Palestine in the Israel-Hamas war have been held in many Indonesian cities. These cities included Jakarta, Bekasi, Bandung, Semarang, Solo, Surabaya, Medan, and Makassar. The 5 November demonstration held in Jakarta was attended by the most people, including the highest attendance by conservative Muslims since the re-election of Jokowi in 2019. Anies Baswedan, the presidential candidate from the conservative Muslim camp, gave a fiery speech.

One week later, another major public demonstration took place in Bekasi, in the outskirts of Jakarta, which was also attended by Baswedan. This was followed by the issuance of a fatwa (religious edict) by the Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI, Indonesian Ulema Council) urging Muslims to boycott products from companies deemed to be supportive of Israel.

Such political mobilisation of Muslim demonstrators and the involvement of MUI and other organisations were quite similar to the circumstances surrounding the blasphemy case involving Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (the Chinese Christian Governor of Jakarta also known as Ahok) in 2016-2017, which were partly responsible for the election of Baswedan as the Governor of Jakarta.

However, there were two marked differences. Firstly, the demonstrations this time saw the active participation of senior officials from Jokowi's administration. They included Retno Marsudi, the Foreign Minister; Muhadjir Effendy, the Coordinating Minister for Human Development and Cultural Affairs; and Yaqut Cholil Qoumas, the Minister for Religious Affairs. Another notable participant was Puan Maharani, Speaker of the Indonesian Parliament and the leading figure in the ruling Indonesian Democratic

Party, Struggle (PDI-P). The second difference was the inclusiveness of the demonstration as indicated by the participation of people representing all major religions in Indonesia. Non-Muslims showed their strong support for the Palestinians as well.

Despite attempts by the nationalist government and parties to portray the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands as one of the last vestiges of colonialism, rather than an inter-religious conflict, it was clear that the issue is closer to the hearts of conservative Muslims than it is to other groups. As the February 2024 General Election approaches, the nationalist presidential candidates and political parties are vying for Muslim votes.

This was already apparent since early 2023, when the nationalist governors, including Ganjar Pranowo from Central Java, issued a letter rejecting the participation of the Israeli Under-20 football team in the FIFA U-20 World Cup scheduled to be held in Indonesia in May 2023. The presence of Jokowi's ministers and Puan Maharani during the pro-Palestine demonstration in Jakarta should be seen in this light.

Conclusion

To conclude, it should be noted that since the Israel-Hamas war erupted on 7 October, opinion polls indicate that Baswedan's popularity has increased. While he may not win the February 2024 election for the next President of Indonesia, the votes that he will receive – given the rate his popularity is growing on the Palestinian issue – might be sufficient to bring him to the election run-off. While there may be other variables at play to account for his growing popularity, the surge in the mobilisation of the conservative Muslims arising from the current Israel-Hamas war will continue to benefit Baswedan.

This will necessitate appropriate tactical responses from the other candidates running for the Presidential Office. This means that the situation in Gaza and the future of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will have greater domestic political salience in Indonesia, with significant consequences for Indonesian foreign policy and Jakarta's relations with ASEAN member states and ASEAN dialogue partners.

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