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Islamic Defenders Front: An Ideological Evolution?

By Alexander R. Arifianto

Synopsis

The Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) has gained a reputation as one of the most outspoken hardline Islamist groups in Indonesia today. It has evolved from a vigilante group into an organisation with a coherent ideology and political goals that might challenge the integrity of the Indonesian state based on the Pancasila.

Commentary

FPI - the Islamic Defenders Front known by its Indonesian name *Front Pembela Islam* has gained renewed attention after organising a series of demonstrations against former Jakarta Governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama between November 2016 and May 2017. These protests, attended by approximately two to three million protesters, helped to contribute to his re-election defeat and subsequent conviction for allegedly committing a religious blasphemy.

FPI's success in organising the demonstrations marked another milestone in its 20-year history as a hardline Islamist organisation. Long perceived as no more than a vigilante group which uses Islamic symbols to promote its socio-political agenda, it has become a political movement with a clearly defined ideology. Despite its relatively small membership of approximately 200,000 members nationwide, it commands significant influence among other hardline Islamist groups and politicians wanting to capitalise on the group's extensive grassroots networks to further their electoral ambitions.

NKRI Bersyariah

FPI has developed an alliance with both the Islamic Community Forum (FUI) and

Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) since at least 2008, when the three Islamist organisations put pressure on the Indonesian government to issue a decree that limits the activity of the Ahmadiyah, a sect originated in Pakistan which is considered to be deviant by mainstream Muslims.

Even though the decree did not fully prohibit the Ahmadis from operating in Indonesia, it severely restricted its activities and made it subjected to local prohibitions and forced closures of its mosques authorised by local authorities done to enforce this decree.

FPI unveiled its ideology called the Unitary State of Republic Indonesia under Islamic (*shariah*) Law (*NKRI Bersyariah*) in 2013. It was developed by FPI leader Habib Rizieq Shihab and FUI's general secretary Muhammad al-Khatnath. This ideology states that in contrast to established Indonesian history, Indonesia's national ideology *Pancasila* is derived from the Jakarta Charter, a document proposed by a number of Islamic leaders who sat in the Committee for Investigation and Preparatory Work for Indonesian Independence (BPUPKI) in 1945.

FPI believes *shariah* law is compatible with the Indonesian state founded on NKRI principles. Accordingly, it should follow Islamic principles and all of its leaders, starting from the president, must be practising Muslims. This position differs from the interpretation of other hardline Islamist groups like HTI, which argues that the NKRI is illegitimate because it was founded based upon liberal secularist principles and only recognised Indonesia as part of a global caliphate.

FPI believes that seven decades after Indonesia gained its independence in 1945, it has strayed away from Islamic to secularist principles, which contributes to the rise of immorality within the Indonesian society, from political corruption to increased crime and drug usages. To resolve these problems, FPI calls for the reintroduction of the original interpretation of the Jakarta Charter, which mandates all Indonesian Muslims to observe the *shariah*, both nationally and locally. This suggestion is widely supported by other hardline groups and some politicians who aligned themselves closely with the group.

Campaign to Promote *Shariah* Law

Together with FUI and other hardline groups, it has actively campaigned for the enactment of local *shariah* regulations throughout Indonesia, arguing that the enactment of local regulations can serve as a springboard for the enactment of national *shariah* regulations later. Thanks to their networks both within political parties and security officials, FPI has gained influence in many provincial and regional local government elections.

Their ability to mobilise support from hardline Islamist voters from low to middle income background have attracted numerous local politicians from both Islamic and secular political parties who developed alliances with the group, in exchange for a pledge from the politicians to help enact local *shariah* regulations once they are elected as local executives or legislators.

An example of this arrangement was made between FPI and West Java governor Ahmad Heryawan during his 2013 re-election campaign as the province's governor.

He was forced to retract it once it was made public by a number of news media reports. More recently, FPI has been involved in the campaign to replace current West Kalimantan governor Cornelis, who is not eligible to run for re-election in 2018.

Cornelis, a Dayak Christian, has strongly condemned FPI actions in Jakarta and has prohibited the organisation from operating within his province. In retaliation, FPI has supported several likely gubernatorial candidates with pious credentials in exchange for their support to enact Islamic regulations within the province.

Vigilantes No More

Thanks to their success to influence local politics, FPI leaders have concluded that their goal to enact *NKRI Bersyariah* is nearly complete. FPI leaders interviewed by the Indonesia Programme indicated according to their interpretation, *shariah* is applicable for all citizens. Non-Muslims also need to abide by it as the majority of Indonesian Muslims wanted the *shariah* to be implemented as law. However, there is adequate protection for non-Muslims in the *shariah* to guarantee their civil rights would be protected within an Islamic state.

The FPI is no longer a group of vigilantes or brigands with no ideological convictions. Instead, it has become an Islamist organisation that commands significant political influence, due to its networks with other Islamist groups and opportunistic politicians.

Will they, as a collective force, constitute a significant challenge to the integrity of the Indonesian state as envisioned in the *Pancasila*, which declares all Indonesians as members of one nation irrespective of their ethnic and religious backgrounds? Regardless, FPI's ideological evolution and political aims are likely to transform it into an influential actor on the eve of the 2019 presidential election.

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