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Explaining the 2016 Islamist Mobilisation in Indonesia: Religious Intolerance, Militant Groups and the Politics of Accommodation

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ABSTRACT

There has been an intense scholarly debate about what caused the unprecedented Islamist mass demonstrations in Indonesia in late 2016. Some scholars have argued that increasing intolerance and conservatism among the Muslim population are responsible, while others have disputed such notions, claiming that there is no evidence of widespread support for an Islamist agenda. In this article, we analyse a unique set of polling data to show that a) conservative attitudes among Indonesian Muslims were declining rather than increasing prior to the mobilisation, but that b) around a quarter of Indonesian Muslims do support an Islamist socio-political agenda. Importantly, we demonstrate that this core constituency of conservative Muslims has grown more educated, more affluent and better connected in the last decade or so, increasing its organisational capacity. We argue that this capacity was mobilised at a time when conservative Muslims felt excluded from the current polity, following the end of a decade of accommodation.

KEYWORDS

Indonesia; democracy; populism; Islamism; radicalism; intolerance; party system

On 2 December 2016, more than 500,000 Indonesians hit the streets of Jakarta to demand the arrest of the Christian-Chinese governor of the Indonesian capital. They accused him of blasphemy, alleging that a speech the governor – Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, or Ahok – gave in September had insulted Islam. In a prior demonstration in November, around 200,000 people had called for the government to indict Ahok, which the police did shortly afterwards. Running for re-election during that time, Ahok saw his polling numbers drop sharply as a result of the case. Conversely, the groups and politicians driving the anti-Ahok campaign enjoyed new heights of media attention. Habib Rizieq Shihab, the leader of the militant Islamic Defenders' Front (Front Pembela Islam, FPI), became the public face of the protest, while Ahok's two challengers in the gubernatorial election increased their support significantly. Despite a 74 per cent approval rating as governor, Ahok went on to lose the election in a landslide in April 2017, and he was sentenced to two years in prison for the abovementioned blasphemy case in the following month.

The events surrounding Ahok caused a heated debate not only among Indonesian citizens, but also between scholars of Indonesian Islam and politics. In the centre of the controversy was the question of whether the spike in Islamist mobilisation was a unique phenomenon reflecting the very specific circumstances of the Ahok case (Aspinall, 2017),

or whether it signalled the rise of a new form of Islamist populism (or “mobocracy”) in Indonesia (Fauzi, 2016). In this context, a variety of other questions emerged. For instance, were the mass protests – some of the largest ever recorded in Indonesian history – evidence of increasing conservatism among Indonesian Muslims (Lindsey, 2016)? Were groups such as FPI representing genuine sentiments among the population, or were they only pawns used by national political actors to damage Ahok and his patron, President Joko Widodo (“Jokowi”)? In other words, did the events indicate a considerable shift in the religious, social and political attitudes of Indonesians, or were they the result of a rare coincidence of political dynamics and thus unlikely to remain influential patterns in the years to come?

Greg Fealy, for example, was among those who argued that the circumstances of the Ahok case were so particular that it would be inaccurate to view it as proof of a wider trend of support for an Islamist agenda in Indonesia. Fealy (2016) wrote:

There are good reasons to doubt that [the December demonstration] does mark some conservative surge. To begin with, only a minority appeared to be affiliated with known Islamist groups or drawn to the more ideological Islamist messages in the rally.

Based on his observations during that rally, he claimed that “For the great majority, this was primarily a religious event, [...] and many [...] rejected on principle attempts to Islamise the Constitution and restrict non-Muslim rights”. Luthfi Assyaukanie (2016), by contrast, saw the protests as “tip-of-the-iceberg displays of Islamic conservatism that has been emerging in the past 15 years. Beneath this tip lies a huge mound of religious fanaticism within a widely touted moderate Muslim society”. Pointing to the increased inflow of Middle Eastern values as a consequence of the post-1998 democratic opening, Assyaukanie asserted that “the fruits of these Wahhabi campaigns are now apparent with many Indonesian Muslims trying to embrace a Saudi Arabian lifestyle”.

One of the reasons for the uncertainty among scholars over the extent of conservative and radical attitudes among Indonesian Muslims has been the tradition of looking at election results as a relevant indicator for the strength of Islamist sentiments. In 2009, for example, when the vote share of Islamic parties hit a historic low, some scholars debated whether this indicated “the end of political Islam” (Hamayotsu, 2011). Similarly, Saiful Mujani and R. William Liddle (2009) viewed the 2009 results as evidence that voters were turning away from Islamic law as a political priority, but when Islamic parties improved their electoral performance in 2014, one international television network anxiously asked “is political Islam rising in Indonesia?” (Al Jazeera, 2014). For a number of reasons, this focus on results for Islamic parties has always been an insufficient indicator of Indonesians’ views on the role Islam should play in their lives. Most importantly, Indonesia’s electoral laws institutionally engineer a trend towards centripetal platforms, discouraging parties with narrow ideological or local bases from running. Hence, conservative Muslims¹ may have abstained, voted for a moderate Islamic party although their own preferences were more militant, or opted for a nominally secular-nationalist party because its candidates presented themselves as devout Muslims.

In this article, therefore, we offer alternative ways of measuring the level of conservatism among Indonesian Muslims. This allows us to make a significant contribution to the debate among Indonesianist scholars about whether this level did or did not cause the 2016 Islamist demonstrations. In order to do so, we first establish the extent of conservative and radical sentiments in Indonesia’s Muslim population. Our

assessment is based on a unique set of polling data on religious intolerance from the years 2010, 2011 and 2016.² Given this multi-year perspective, we are also able to say whether the number of Muslim conservatives has risen or not. Second, we use data reaching back to 2004 to closely investigate the core of the conservative Muslim constituency, which we define as those who support the FPI. In additional surveys, we asked voters in five provinces in early 2017 whether they would vote for FPI if it stood as a political party in elections. Third, we ask why this group did not mobilise effectively around themes of Islamist populism before 2016. The fourth, concluding section reviews our data in the context of the inclusion-moderation theory, which argues that political participation tends to moderate Islamist parties. For us, the Indonesian case shows that the democratic moderation of previously Islamist parties can, in fact, strengthen populist alternatives.

Our findings paint a more nuanced picture of the drivers behind the anti-Ahok demonstrations than has been offered in previous writings. While there is evidence of significant support for conservative and radical religious views among Indonesian Muslims, our data did not confirm the hypothesis that these sentiments were on the rise before the 2016 demonstrations. Indeed, we found a considerable *decline* in conservative and radical attitudes between 2010 and 2016. There are, however, strong indications of a perceptible shift in the demographic profiles of intolerant Muslims, away from the poorer and uneducated to the more affluent and highly educated. Contrary to assertions by some authors, we did find widespread support for FPI and its Islamist agenda. This points to problems with the representativeness of the post-Suharto party system, which has left the most conservative fringe of the Islamist spectrum unaccommodated. That this fringe only mobilised as an influential Islamist-populist movement in 2016 is due to the fact, we argue, that it was previously appeased by Yudhoyono. Jokowi's election, however, ended this accommodation, sending Indonesia's most conservative Muslims onto the streets to challenge the existing order.

We base our findings predominantly on a series of surveys by the Indonesian Survey Institute (Lembaga Survei Indonesia, LSI) and Indonesian Political Indicator (Indikator Politik Indonesia, referred to in the following as Indikator). In some cases, we added data from Saiful Mujani Research and Consulting (SMRC). LSI, Indikator and SMRC generally use the standard methodology of surveying Indonesians over the age of 17. However, in the 2010, 2011 and 2016 surveys, only the data derived from Muslim Indonesians was processed and analysed. Multistage random sampling was used to produce a sample that allows for a scientifically sound portrayal of the targeted respondent population. One of the authors, Burhanuddin Muhtadi, has been involved with LSI and Indikator, and has worked on several of the surveys. We have obtained the necessary permissions for the use of the data for all surveys. For the three main LSI surveys on intolerance in 2010, 2011 and 2016,³ the full reports are referenced. In other cases, when data was adopted from unrelated polls, only the survey organisation and the date of the data collection are given.

The Level of Religious Intolerance and Radicalism in Indonesia

Our first challenge is to assess whether rising religious intolerance and radicalism among Indonesian Muslims was responsible for the Islamist-populist mobilisation in late 2016. This was the suggestion by a number of scholars (Assyaukanie, 2017; Lindsey, 2016; Jones, 2016; Varagur, 2017), and by many international media outlets (see, for instance, *The Wall Street Journal*, 2016). But making this determination is susceptible to a host of methodological complexities. In addition to the general problem of establishing the extent of religiosity or radicalism in a population (Storm, 2012; Huber & Huber, 2012), there is the issue of how to locate any findings on a comparative scale (i.e. what would constitute a “high” or “low” level of intolerance by international standards). Furthermore, the claim of “rising” intolerance makes it essential to investigate whether that level changed over time. In terms of the core methodological design, the surveys we used asked questions often raised in international surveys on religiosity. Nevertheless, the surveys we used were exclusively conducted in Indonesia, making global comparisons difficult. In order to address this problem, we refer to surveys on other countries whenever the same or similar questions were put forward. Finally, as stated earlier, we are able to determine whether the level of intolerance has changed as we have data from major surveys from 2010, 2011 and 2016 in which some of the questions were identical (other, non-identical questions were not used for our data analysis).

Let us begin by establishing the general level of religious intolerance among Indonesian Muslims. In the March 2016 survey by LSI, this was done by creating an aggregate score from six major questions, which assessed objections towards a) the holding of religious events by non-Muslims in the neighbourhood; b) the building of non-Muslim places of worship in the neighbourhood; c) non-Muslims as mayors or regents; d) non-Muslims as vice president; e) non-Muslims as governors; and f) non-Muslims as president. In the index developed from the answers to these questions, a score of between 75 and 100 (that is, if a respondent answered all or almost all questions in the affirmative) led to the classification as “very intolerant”; a score of between 50 and 75 (meaning the respondent answered more than half of the questions positively) denoted “intolerant”; a score of 25 to 50 indicated the categorisation “tolerant”, and of 0 to 25 “very tolerant”. Based on this classification scheme, 27.8 per cent of Indonesians in 2016 were very intolerant, 13.7 per cent intolerant, 18.6 per cent tolerant and 39.9 per cent very tolerant (LSI, 2016, p. 35). Overall, then, the percentage of Indonesian Muslims holding intolerant views towards non-Muslims stood at 41.5 per cent in early 2016, just before the Ahok affair commenced.

While this appears to be a high number, a look at comparable surveys in other countries mitigates that impression. Applying a comparative perspective becomes particularly striking if we turn to the reverse constellation – that is, surveys of intolerance towards Muslims in majority Christian countries. In a 2010 survey in several Western European countries (Universität Münster, 2010), 57.7 per cent of West Germans (and 62.2 per cent of East Germans) held negative views of Muslims. In Denmark, the number of citizens harbouring intolerant views of Muslims was 35.6 per cent, in France 36.7 per cent, in the Netherlands 35.9 per cent and in Portugal 33.5 per cent.

If the level of intolerance towards non-Muslims in Indonesia is compared to that in fellow majority Muslim countries, the result is also inconclusive. In the Pew Research Center (2013, p. 124) survey on Muslim attitudes around the world – one of the very few points of comparison available – Indonesia recorded the lowest percentage of respondents in the Muslim world who felt comfortable with their son marrying a Christian woman (6 per cent, as opposed to 30 per cent in Tunisia). But in other areas of Islamic morality, many Indonesian Muslims hold views that diverge from a strict interpretation of scripture. For instance, 58 per cent of Indonesians find polygamy – allowed by the Qur'an – to be morally wrong (Pew Research Center, 2013, p. 84). This is the highest number in Asia, and significantly higher than in most African countries. Overall, then, it appears that the number of citizens adhering to religiously intolerant views is high in Indonesia – but it is high in other countries as well.

A similar picture emerges when we turn to the level of radicalism. In contrast to the exploration of attitudes towards non-Muslims, the questions asked in this category focused on actual radical behaviour, or the willingness to engage in such behaviour. In this context, the 2016 LSI survey asked Muslim respondents whether they have participated or are willing to participate in a) donating to an organisation committed to the implementation of Islamic law; b) convincing friends or relatives to join the fight for the implementation of Islamic law; c) planning or taking part in raids of places deemed in violation of Islamic law, such as discotheques, brothels or gambling dens; d) conducting demonstrations against groups seen as insulting or threatening Islam; and e) conducting attacks on non-Muslim places of worship. In LSI's classification scheme, only respondents answering that they indeed have participated in attacks on non-Muslim places of worship were seen as radical. The other categories (willing to be radical, neutral and unwilling to be radical) were drawn from a similar score system to that used to assess intolerance. As a result, 0.4 per cent were classified as radical; 7.7 per cent as willing to be radical; 19.9 per cent as neutral; and 72 per cent as unwilling to be radical (LSI, 2016, p. 17).

In combination, therefore, the potential for religious radicalism among Indonesian Muslims stands at 8.1 per cent. This number is almost congruent with the 7 per cent of Indonesian Muslims who stated in the Pew Research Center (2013, p. 70) survey that they considered attacks against civilians in defence of Islam as sometimes or often justified. This number was, however, lower than in most other Muslim majority countries – it was 26 per cent in Bangladesh, for example.

Having established the levels of religious intolerance and inclination towards radical action among Indonesian Muslims, we now need to ask whether these levels had been increasing before the 2016 demonstrations. This was a key claim by some scholars. Comparing the 2016 LSI survey with two previous surveys done in 2010 and 2011 allows us to answer this question systematically. Focusing on the questions that were asked in all three surveys, there is a consistent *decline* in intolerant and radical attitudes among Muslims between 2010 and 2016. For example, the number of Muslims objecting to non-Muslim religious events in their neighbourhood declined from 51.6 per cent in 2010 to 49.6 per cent in 2011 and 39.6 per cent in 2016. Similarly, the percentage of Indonesian Muslims objecting to non-Muslim places of worship being built in their neighbourhood decreased from 63.8 per cent in 2010 to 60.6 per cent in 2011 and 52 per cent in 2016. In the same vein, respondents who said they donated to organisations committed to the implementation of Islamic law made up 37.4 per cent in 2010, 25 per

cent in 2011 and 13.7 per cent in 2016. Actual attackers of non-Muslim places of worship stood at 1.3 per cent in 2010, 1.8 per cent in 2011 and 0.4 per cent in 2016. Indeed, we found that every single question that was asked in all three surveys showed a trend of declining intolerance and radicalism between 2010 and 2016 (LSI, 2010, pp. 14–15, p. 89; LSI, 2011, p. 18, pp. 114–115; LSI, 2016, p. 13, pp. 24–29).

Although we found no evidence of an expansion in the number of conservative and radical Muslims in Indonesia, there has been a significant shift in the socioeconomic profiles of those Muslims. In the 2011 LSI survey, there was still a clear correlation between education and income levels on the one hand and levels of conservatism and radicalism on the other. Concretely, the higher a person's education and income, the lower the levels of conservative and radical attitudes (LSI, 2011, p. 257). This was in line with a vast body of literature describing similar links between socioeconomic advancement and declining vulnerability to radicalism (Murshed & Pavan, 2009; Veldhuis & Staun, 2009). By 2016, however, that correlation had disappeared (LSI, 2016, p. 225). Indeed, in a number of key questions particularly relevant for this study, the trend had reversed: now Muslims with high education and income were *more* intolerant than Muslims with low education and income. For instance, 43.9 per cent of Muslims with a tertiary degree rejected non-Muslims as governors, as opposed to 39 per cent among those with an elementary school education (or less). In the income category, 50.6 per cent of high earners objected to a non-Muslim president, as opposed to only 41.5 per cent among low-income respondents. Furthermore, across all intolerance questions asked in the survey, traders, private entrepreneurs and office employees were less tolerant than peasants, fishermen, casual labourers, house maids and motorcycle taxi drivers.⁴

The main socio-demographic trend among Indonesian Muslims between the early 2010s and 2016 was therefore not rising conservatism, but a shift of the epicentre of conservative-radical attitudes from the lower classes to the middle classes and elites. (It is important to emphasise that the latter have always played a strong role in organised Islamism – we show, however, that by 2016 they had developed into the strongest social group in holding intolerant views towards non-Muslims.) Hence, Islamic conservatism in 2016 was not growing stronger across society as a whole, but was increasingly adopted and propagated by high-income Muslims with key positions in society and the economy. This finding corresponds with important observations surrounding the anti-Ahok protests. First, it confirms reports on the participants in the rallies, which agreed that “a large part” were educated members of the middle class (Weng, 2016). Second, it substantiates claims that Islamist groups targeted the middle class in particular with their anti-Ahok activism. Led by “conservative middle-class intellectuals who have been gaining confidence in translating Islamic faith into public social activism”, these Islamist organisations attract “teachers, students and university lecturers” (Chaplin, 2016). Once properly instructed, newly recruited academic leaders spread their ideas to the next generation of highly-educated Muslims.

Crucially, the survey data also supports claims that it was under Yudhoyono that Islamic conservatism spread among tertiary degree holders in key political and social positions. In the early 2010s, this group was the most tolerant among Indonesian Muslims; by 2016, however, it had become the most intolerant. At least in part, this turn can be attributed to Yudhoyono's (and thus the state's) strong support for the conservative Indonesian Council of Islamic Scholars (Majelis Ulama Indonesia, MUI),

which focused on consolidating scripturalist Islamic views in the Indonesian elite (Hasyim, 2015). Under Yudhoyono, the government provided funds, logistical support and protection to MUI and its associates, and the number of conservatives on its board increased substantially during that time. Consequently, the standard bearers of conservatism emerged from the Yudhoyono presidency with better resources, improved connections in the elite and increased access to Indonesia's educational, social and political institutions. It was this increased logistical capacity and ideological firmness developed under Yudhoyono (rather than a conservative surge in society at large) that MUI and its partners used to mobilise for the anti-Ahok demonstrations in 2016.⁵

The Islamist Core: FPI and its Supporters

The discussion thus far has shown that there has been no rise in conservatism among Muslim Indonesians that could explain the sudden onset of the Islamist demonstrations in late 2016. It would be wrong, however, to infer from this that the participants in these demonstrations did not support a broader agenda of political Islamisation, and that they were not drawn to the militant groups leading the protests (Fealy, 2016; Coca, 2016). As shown above, there is a core of conservative, religiously intolerant Muslims that makes up around 28 per cent of the Islamic population. These are Muslims who object to non-Muslims organising religious events in their neighbourhood, building places of worship there, or holding high elected office. This exclusivist attitude towards non-Muslims is at the heart of the Islamist agenda promoted by groups such as FPI, and support for this agenda is strong among the core conservatives mentioned above – indeed, using the Pearson correlation, we found that in the 2016 LSI survey there was a strong relationship between intolerance and support for FPI (at the 99 per cent significance level). But as we demonstrate below, support for militant groups goes beyond just backing their ideas; rather, a sizeable proportion of the Indonesian Muslim population explicitly identifies with FPI, and would vote for the group if it stood in elections.

We argue that this finding suggests a need to re-evaluate the scholarly portrayal of FPI. The group, founded in 1998, has thus far been predominantly depicted as a predatory, opportunistic association of thugs, whose interests are more economic than religious (Wilson, 2014; 2015). Indeed, there is much evidence to support that depiction. But in the perception of many conservative Muslims, the group has evolved into something much more substantive than that. With its anti-political-correctness rhetoric, its open attacks on ethnic Chinese and Christians, its conspiracy theories about Muslim victimisation, and its unfiltered demands to Islamise state and society, FPI has attracted those conservative Muslims for whom the existing Islamic parties have become too moderate. Building ties with existing networks such as MUI and broadening its base through incessant social media messaging, FPI has established itself as a protest-party-in-waiting. Similar to left- and right-wing populist parties in Europe and Australia, FPI has quietly collected the support of anti-status-quo voters. In contrast to its Western counterparts, however, FPI remains outside the existing party system, creating incentives for extra-parliamentary mobilisation.

Our first related data set supporting these hypotheses contains responses to questions about awareness of FPI and support for its agenda. These questions were asked between November 2004 and November 2016 in nationwide surveys that we have access to. This

allows us to trace FPI's popularity over time, and to assess whether it was only a temporary phenomenon surrounding the anti-Ahok demonstrations. Looking at the multi-year responses, it is clear that a) awareness of FPI has risen over time, from around 40 per cent of Indonesian Muslims in 2004 to 60 per cent in 2016; and b) the group of Muslims who not only know but support FPI's agenda remained stable during that period at between 14 and 24 per cent (see [Figure 1](#)).⁶ Most importantly, FPI established itself in that period among conservative Muslims as the most popular representative of militant ideas. No other ultra-conservative group achieved comparable numbers of awareness and popularity. Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI), for example – often described as one of the most powerful Islamist networks in Indonesia (Ward, 2009) – was known and supported by only 3.4 per cent of the Muslim population in mid-2016.

In order to get a better sense of the size of the constituency of FPI's core supporters, we asked respondents (both Muslim and non-Muslim) whether they would vote for it if it participated in general elections. While we do not have nationwide, multi-year data on this question, we inserted this category into several Indikator opinion surveys in North Sumatra (February 2017), Jakarta (January, February and April 2017), East Kalimantan (March 2017) and Papua (March-April 2017), and into an exit poll conducted after a provincial election in Banten (February 2017). In the April Jakarta poll, 86 per cent of respondents said they knew FPI, and of those, 16 per cent claimed they would vote for it. Thus, out of Jakarta's total electorate (including non-Muslims), 13.8 per cent would potentially vote for FPI. In Banten, that number stood at 22.1 per cent, in North Sumatra at 15.9 per cent, in East Kalimantan at 9.3 per cent, and in Papua at 1.8 per cent. Hence, in Muslim majority areas, the percentage of Indonesians willing to vote for FPI broadly corresponds to the level of Muslims endorsing a conservative religious agenda.

In Jakarta, we also asked respondents about their views on Rizieq Shihab. A reviled figure among liberals, non-Muslims and moderate followers of the Islamic faith, he commands significant levels of sympathy among more conservative Muslims, and even beyond. In two separate Indikator surveys in January and February 2017, 86 per cent of Jakartans stated that they knew of Rizieq Shihab, and half of those (50 per cent in January and 49 per cent in February) said that they liked him. The comparison between the January and February polls is crucial as the first poll was taken before the government laid several criminal charges on him (and the police started to investigate a pornographic video allegedly involving Rizieq), while the second was conducted shortly afterwards. Although the government's attempts to criminalise Rizieq intimidated him (he temporarily moved to Saudi Arabia to escape prosecution), they evidently did not damage his popularity.

An analysis of the socio-demographic profile of FPI supporters confirms our conclusion on the increasing attractiveness of conservative Islamic ideas among Muslims with high education and income levels. While FPI has been traditionally described as a group consisting of young, lowly-educated men from poor backgrounds, a demographic portrait of its sympathisers looks distinctly different. Data from the 2016 LSI poll is illustrative in this regard. Among Indonesian Muslims with a tertiary degree, 18.7 per cent knew and supported FPI, while only 8.2 per cent of Muslims with an elementary school education (or less) did.⁷ In fact, only 34.8 per cent of lowly-educated Muslims had heard of FPI, while 89.4 per cent of Muslims with a tertiary degree were aware of it. The same picture emerges from investigating FPI support among different income classes. In 2016, 20.1 per cent of high-income Muslims supported FPI, while only 7.5

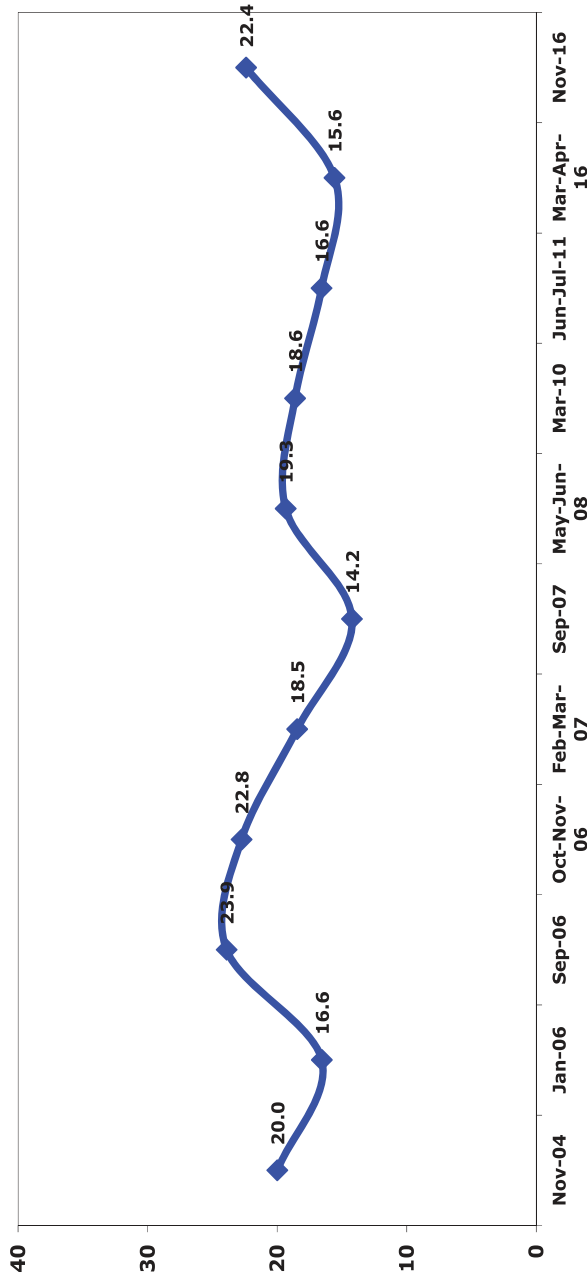


Figure 1. Percentage of Indonesian Muslims supporting FPI and its agenda

per cent of low-income Muslims did. Among professions, office employees had the highest support rates for FPI, at 22.6 per cent. By contrast, only 12.2 per cent of peasants and fishermen supported FPI, as did 15.5 per cent of casual labourers, house maids and motorcycle taxi drivers.

We also explored how self-declared potential FPI voters had voted in previous ballots. Answering this question is important to assess the extent to which potential FPI voters did find outlets for their aspirations in the existing party system, and what these outlets were. Indikator's April 2017 pre-election survey in Jakarta gives some clues in this regard. Voters who professed that they would vote for FPI in an upcoming election if it was available were also asked which party they supported in the 2014 elections. A plurality of potential FPI voters (21 per cent, with non-voters excluded) voted in 2014 for Gerindra, the party headed by the militant populist Prabowo Subianto, who promised to return Indonesia to its pre-democratic constitution if elected president. Correspondingly, 71 per cent of potential FPI voters said they voted for Prabowo in the 2014 presidential elections. While Prabowo had links to Islamic militants in the past, he ran on a nominally pluralist platform in 2014 (Aspinall, 2015), and was himself not seen as a devout or conservative Muslim. Thus, for many religiously conservative Muslims unable to vote for FPI, Prabowo and his party were pragmatic options in a party system that did not feature what they would view as a truly Islamist party representing their interests.

This pragmatic fluidity in the voting behaviour of FPI supporters becomes even clearer when analysing the category of their most recent party choice. When asked in February 2017 which existing party they would vote for now (as opposed to their past choice in 2014), Jakartan supporters of FPI expressed their plurality support for Yudhoyono's Democrat Party (Partai Demokrat, PD). In this poll, PD stood at 24 per cent, with Gerindra following in second spot. This finding reflects the fact that it was Yudhoyono, not Prabowo, who had taken a leading role in the anti-Ahok demonstrations (more about this below). Accordingly, he and his party were the most attractive option for possible FPI voters in 2017, just as Prabowo and Gerindra were in 2014. PD was also the preferred alternative for FPI supporters in Banten (22 per cent). In North Sumatra, however, where the majority of FPI sympathisers (21 per cent) had in 2014 opted for the modernist-Muslim National Mandate Party (Partai Amanat Nasional, PAN), questions after the most recent party choice showed the Prosperous Justice Party (Partai Keadilan Sejahtera, PKS) on top. At only 12 per cent, however, this support level indicated confusion among potential FPI supporters rather than a clear flow of voting preferences to PKS.

Significantly, many FPI sympathisers are non-voters (i.e. respondents who did not vote in the 2014 elections). We don't possess data on non-voters among FPI sympathisers for all of our polls, but we can establish the percentage of pro-FPI non-voters in the 2017 North Sumatra, Jakarta (April), East Kalimantan and Papua surveys. If 2014 non-voters are included in the party preference category, they constitute by far the biggest respondent group in North Sumatra and in Jakarta – 31 and 32 per cent respectively. In East Kalimantan and Papua, these percentages are lower, but also less significant given their much smaller population numbers.

There is much to suggest, then, that a sizeable voting bloc of pro-FPI, conservative Muslims has been either abstaining from voting or attaching itself to changing parties and patrons because the existing party system offers them no outlet more reflective of

their preferences. This is also evident in the rapidly declining number of Indonesians who feel close to a political party, a category described as “party identification”. This number stood at 86 per cent during the first parliamentary elections of 1999 (Mietzner, 2013, p. 44), but began to collapse in 2004. In August 2016, it stood at 11 per cent, making Indonesia one of the countries with the lowest party identification levels in the world. A host of explanations has been offered for this phenomenon: for instance, that Indonesia has gradually moved from a party- to a candidate-centred electoral system (Mietzner, 2013); that Indonesians are turned off by the parties’ corruption (Hamid, 2012); and that Indonesian parties are dominated by charismatic leaders rather than platforms (Fionna, 2016). While all of these explanations are valid, it is equally likely that the non-accommodation of strictly conservative Muslims by the existing party system has contributed to this trend.

A look at the trajectory of existing Islamic parties provides further support for this assertion. PKS, for example, was initially an attractive option for conservative Muslims (Buehler, 2012). Connected to the Ikhwanul Muslimin movement in the Middle East, PKS performed well in the 2004 elections after a strong campaign based on Islamic values and anti-corruption messages. But after 2004, party leaders decided to move PKS ideologically to the centre, and engage in fundraising activities they believed were necessary to win future elections (Muhtadi, 2012). This shift led to ideological confusion and PKS’s entanglement in a number of corruption scandals, with the party’s president arrested on corruption charges in 2012. In 2015, a new party leadership took over that pledged to return to the ideological roots of the early 2000s. But even this move, which in theory could have benefited from the demographic change within the conservative Muslim constituency – away from the lower social strata to the middle classes, which forms PKS’s core support group – has not made the party much more attractive to FPI loyalists, as our surveys have shown. Similarly, the Muslim-based United Development Party (Partai Persatuan Pembangunan, PPP) tried to portray itself as a moderate party for much of the late 2000s (Mietzner, 2008, p. 448), and it too became involved in illicit fundraising. Unsurprisingly, therefore, its attractiveness for FPI sympathisers remains limited.

Other Muslim-based parties have not been of great interest to potential FPI voters either. PAN, for instance, rejects the implementation of Islamic law in Indonesia, and holds moderate positions on many of the key questions on the role of Islam in society as well. So does the National Awakening Party (Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa, PKB), which is rooted in the traditionalist Muslim organisation Nahdlatul Ulama (NU). In 2002, both parties rejected, together with secular-nationalist parties, the re-introduction of the Jakarta Charter into the constitution, which would have required every Muslim to observe Islamic law. In the secular-nationalist spectrum, Gerindra and PD have been able to attract FPI sympathisers at particular political junctures, but in programmatic terms, there is a significant gap in the aspirations of average Gerindra and PD voters on the one hand and potential FPI voters on the other. For its part, the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (Partai Demokrasi Indonesia Perjuangan, PDIP) is ideologically furthest away from FPI positions; indeed, among those Jakarta voters who had never heard of FPI, PDIP supporters made up by far the biggest contingent (46 per cent), and they did so too among voters who expressed dislike for FPI (37 per cent). Golkar, Suharto’s former electoral machine, also has little affinity with FPI sympathisers.

Part of the explanation for the mismatch between Indonesia's party system inhabited by moderate parties and the existence of a significant immoderate Muslim voting bloc lies in the institutional design of the country's party and electoral system (Macdonald, 2016, pp. 104–105). Ideologically, Indonesian party laws do not allow parties to adopt a platform that contradicts the country's multi-religious state ideology Pancasila and the pluralist constitution. Rizieq Shihab, on the other hand, has openly declared that in cases where Islamic scripture collides with Pancasila and the constitution, the Qur'an must take precedence.⁸ While his denigration of Pancasila has brought Rizieq into conflict with more moderate Indonesian parties, it resonates well with conservative Muslims. In terms of party organisation, Indonesian law strongly discourages the formation of parties that appeal only to segmentally or locally defined constituencies. For that purpose, registration and threshold requirements were tightened over time – currently, parties have to have branches in all provinces to run in elections, and the parliamentary threshold stands at 4 per cent. As a result of these regulations, smaller Islamic parties, some of which supported the Jakarta Charter in 2002, disappeared from the party landscape in the late 2000s (Tomsa, 2010).

This artificially moderated party landscape has made election results of Islamic parties an inaccurate indicator of the strength of the forces advancing religious conservatism in Indonesia. Behind the display of moderate and pluralist rhetoric normal in Indonesian elections, a constituency holding much more conservative views has existed at least since 2004 – the year the surveys cited in this study began. We argue that in order to understand the apparent eruption of Islamist populism on the streets of Jakarta in 2016, it is vital to place it in the context of the non-accommodation of a significant Islamist voting group by the existing party system. But in order to establish why the extra-parliamentary mobilisation only emerged in 2016 although the constituency for a conservative Islamist agenda had existed for more than a decade, we must delve deeper into the mechanisms through which it had been cultivated and appeased by Yudhoyono during his presidency. This is the task we turn to in the next section.

Yudhoyono, Jokowi and Islamic Conservatism

The key to grasping the acquiescence of many Islamic conservatives vis-à-vis Yudhoyono – as opposed to their rejection of Jokowi – lies in the former's policy of accommodation towards them. From the very beginning of his political career, Yudhoyono emphasised the religious character of both his socio-political persona and his party. For example, when he founded Partai Demokrat in 2001, he gave it the label “nationalist-religious”, setting it apart from other, more secularly oriented catch-all parties such as PDIP or Golkar. At PD events, therefore, prayers and recitations of religious verses played a stronger role than in congresses held by its older, pluralist rivals. Yudhoyono also made sure that he presented himself as personally devout and religiously conservative, periodically inserting Islamic references into his speeches and highlighting examples of his private commitment to Islamic values. In 2006, for instance, he told a pleased crowd that he had banned a singer from performing at the palace because she wore attire that exposed her navel.⁹

As president, Yudhoyono pursued policies that either openly supported the interests of Islamic conservatives or shielded them from possible state sanctions (Bush, 2015).

After President Megawati had stonewalled an anti-pornography bill pushed by Islamic forces throughout her term, Yudhoyono accelerated its deliberation and endorsed its passing in 2008 (Sherlock, 2008). One of the clauses that attracted much approval from FPI and other militant groups was Article 21, which opened the door for “society” to participate in the implementation of the law. For FPI and similar groups, this translated into legal protection for their routine attacks on bars and other establishments that offered services that could be deemed pornographic (ranging from prostitution to dance performances). Since then, FPI and affiliated gangs have used the law to justify their raids, of which there have been many.¹⁰ On a more political and strategic level, the law allowed FPI and its allies to sharpen their profile, and made Yudhoyono palatable to Muslim conservatives.

Even more importantly, Yudhoyono tended to tolerate the attacks of FPI and other militant groups on religious minorities and sects, such as the Ahmadis and Shiites. In the wake of MUI decrees against allegedly heretic groups – issued in 2005, the first full year of the Yudhoyono presidency – the number of assaults on these minorities increased (Harsono, 2014). While Yudhoyono condemned such incidents, he portrayed them as “horizontal clashes” between two antagonistic societal groups,¹¹ rather than as unlawful attacks by Islamists on minorities. This view, which in effect supported the narrative offered by FPI, reflected Yudhoyono’s general philosophy of governing Indonesia. From his perspective, the main task of an Indonesian president was to moderate between conflicting interests, regardless of the constitutional validity of their respective claims. In a 2014 interview, Yudhoyono stated that

...the human rights activists told me “let Ahmadiyah be”, that’s their right, that’s the constitution (...). At the same time, however, Islamic leaders pressured me, [Ahmadiyah] has to be banned, has to be dissolved, its followers have to be arrested (...). These groups represent two extremes.¹²

For Yudhoyono, moderating between these two “extremes” meant accommodating the attackers, and ensuring that the attacked no longer triggered tensions. Thus, the existence and worship customs of Ahmadis were heavily regulated, and some local governments imposed de facto bans on their organisation, with Yudhoyono’s approval.

As indicated above, Yudhoyono also dramatically improved the standing of MUI, both institutionally and materially. MUI served as the centre of the vast web of conservative Muslim groups across Indonesia. Initially a body created by Suharto to coopt Muslims into his regime, MUI had lingered at the margins of Indonesian politics under presidents Habibie, Wahid and Megawati. In 2005, however, Yudhoyono gave a speech while opening an MUI congress in which he promised to “place MUI in a central role in matters regarding the Islamic faith, so that it becomes clear what the difference is between areas that are the preserve of the state and areas where the government or state should heed the fatwas from the MUI and *ulama*” (Ricklefs, 2013, p. 37). The anti-heresy fatwas issued by MUI several days later were a direct result of Yudhoyono’s encouragement. Starting from 2004, MUI also received an annual stipend of Rp 3 billion (A\$300,000) from the state,¹³ and local governments too began to open their pockets for the organisation. In addition, the role of MUI in halal certification was gradually expanded, handing it a multi-million dollar operation without standard requirements for transparency.

Yudhoyono consolidated his ties to MUI and other groups by building a range of personal relationships and organisations that could connect him with the Islamist fringe. One key link for Yudhoyono was Maruf Amin, the then head of MUI's powerful fatwa council. In 2007, he became a member of the Presidential Advisory Board, and in 2015 head of MUI. In addition, Yudhoyono developed his own Islamic body, named Majelis Dzikir SBY Nurussalam. With his famous acronym ("SBY") in its name, it was clear to everyone who this organisation represented. It held prayer events, mobilised voters, collected funds and functioned as a bridge to other Muslim organisations. Yudhoyono served as the head of the foundation's advisory board, while its executive chairman was Harris Thahir, a businessman and one-time treasurer for Partai Demokrat. Another important connection for Yudhoyono was Usamah Hisyam, his former biographer. Usamah had good connections with militant Muslims, and in 2015 became chairman of the Indonesian Muslim Brotherhood (Persaudaraan Muslimim Indonesia, Permusi), a PPP-affiliated organisation. Not surprisingly, Maruf, Thahir and Usamah were later widely believed to have played significant roles in the anti-Ahok demonstrations of 2016 and 2017, which Yudhoyono supported.¹⁴

All this helps to explain why Yudhoyono – while not an ideal Islamist president for FPI and its allies – was acceptable to them. Yudhoyono turned a blind eye to most of their campaigns against minorities, and he opened access to the state infrastructure for their Islamist activism. Only once did Habib Rizieq Shihab face consequences for his actions under the Yudhoyono presidency: in 2008, he was sentenced to one and a half years in prison, after a particularly brutal FPI attack on pluralist protesters in Jakarta's Monas Square. There was incontrovertible evidence that Rizieq had ordered the attack, and the media had openly taken the side of the victims – hence, the government did not come to his assistance. But after his release, and throughout Yudhoyono's second term, Rizieq continued to enjoy effective immunity. Overall, then, there was little reason for FPI to rebel against the order over which Yudhoyono presided; accommodated as it was, FPI was part of the delicate inter-constituency arbitration as which Yudhoyono interpreted the Indonesian presidency. In 2014, however, this equilibrium came to an end.

In the 2014 elections, with Yudhoyono barred from running again, FPI threw its support behind Prabowo Subianto. As shown above, the vast majority of FPI sympathisers voted for him, and FPI leaders actively supported him in the campaign. FPI's support for Suharto's former son-in-law was to a large extent due to its fundamental rejection of his opponent, Jokowi. Unlike Yudhoyono, Jokowi – who ran for the nationalist-pluralist PDIP – was highly sceptical of mixing religion and politics. Indeed, the grassroots fixers of the Prabowo campaign portrayed Jokowi as a secularist, communist and agent of foreign interests. At the height of the campaign, rumours were systematically spread that he was the son of a Singaporean Chinese. While it is difficult to say what role FPI played in driving this campaign, its members happily participated in it. In a 2014 interview, Rizieq described Jokowi as a "troublemaker" and "bringer of disasters" for the Muslim community, because in his two previous positions (as mayor of Solo and governor of Jakarta) he had non-Muslims as his deputies, and his campaign team included non-Muslims as well. This, Rizieq said, could be the "Golden Entry Gate for non-Muslims to dominate and control the system".¹⁵ Thus, in the eyes of FPI, Jokowi's victory in the 2014 elections was the beginning of a new era of non-Muslim interference in politics and the economy.

Initially, however, it seemed as if Jokowi would not pose a long-term threat to FPI and other Muslim conservatives. He had no majority in parliament, was in conflict with his own party, and his approval rating dropped to 41 per cent in early 2015 (Indikator, 2017, p.12). Consequently, Jokowi looked like a one-term proposition, creating few incentives for FPI to mobilise extra-parliamentary opposition against him (Muhtadi, 2015). But four developments pushed FPI to change its stance in 2016. First, by mid-2016, Jokowi had turned his minority position in parliament into a supermajority (Warburton, 2016). Second, his popularity ratings recovered dramatically, reaching 67 per cent in mid-2016 (Indikator, 2017, p. 12). Third, parallel to this, his former deputy Ahok commanded similar approval numbers in Jakarta, seemingly setting him up not only for certain re-election, but also for a shot at the vice-presidency in 2019. Fourth, Yudhoyono's re-entry into the political arena – by nominating his son Agus Harimurti in September 2016 to run against Ahok in Jakarta – provided FPI with a familiar sponsor to align with. In short, it was not increasing conservatism in the population or FPI's sudden political surge that explains the mass demonstrations of late 2016; rather, they were triggered by a) FPI's non-accommodation by the Jokowi government; b) the prospect of another Jokowi term; c) mobilisation capacity built up under Yudhoyono; d) the conservatives' penetration of the socioeconomic elites in the last decade; and e) the alignment with Yudhoyono's specific interests in the Jakarta election.

The timing of the Islamists' extra-parliamentary mobilisation, therefore, was the product of a deep sense of exclusion by the post-Yudhoyono polity *and* the conservatives' increased potential for networking, outreach and mobilisation among better educated and more influential supporters. Hence Bastiaan Scherpen (2017) was partially right when stating that FPI and its allies were driving the 2016 mass demonstrations because they “have lost their access to formal power [that they enjoyed under Yudhoyono] and have no other recourse than the Internet and the street”. But this explanation only clarifies why FPI and its affiliates organised the demonstrations; it does not address the question of why so many educated, middle-class Indonesians participated in them. The answer to that question lies in the infiltration of exclusivist, ultra-conservative thinking into the middle and upper classes in the last decade or so. This conservative campaign not only brought more dedicated followers to FPI's cause; in particular, it delivered to FPI an increasing number of supporters in positions of politico-economic influence who consequently could assist in the Islamists' mobilisation efforts.

FPI, Islamic Parties and the Inclusion-Moderation Theory in Indonesia

This article has shown that, contrary to some accounts, the Islamist mobilisation in Indonesia in late 2016 was not the result of increasing religious conservatism among its Muslim population. On the contrary, conservative and radical sentiments within the overall Indonesian Muslim community had been declining between 2010 and 2016. Instead, our data has demonstrated that a sizeable core constituency of conservative Muslims adhering to an exclusivist, Islamist agenda existed at least since 2004, and that its support levels remained roughly stable over time. This constituency has not been accommodated by the existing party system, but temporarily entered into pragmatic cooperation pacts with leading politicians – first, with Yudhoyono and, subsequently, with Prabowo. After Jokowi's ascension to power, and his seemingly unchallenged path

to a second term, the Islamist constituency – symbolised and led by FPI – saw no other option than to mobilise its opposition to the status quo on the streets. Helped by their increased organisational capacity developed in the decade of Yudhoyono's rule, and assisted by their increased appeal to the educated, affluent and thus influential segment of Indonesian society, FPI and its allies managed to stage the largest mass protests since independence.

This pattern of populist, Islamist mobilisation calls into question some of the basic assumptions of the moderation-inclusion theory. According to this model, religious parties – and in the most recent debate, especially Islamist ones – tend to moderate their views if they participate in democratic politics (Kalyvas, 1996; Bayat, 2007; Schwedler, 2006; Clark & Schwedler, 2003). As Dirk Tomsa (2012) has shown, this trend appeared to be at work in Indonesia as well, with PKS moderating significantly after its engagement in the post-1998 electoral and political arena. Yet as Tomsa also argued, and as our discussion in this article suggests, the moderation of Islamist parties operating in the existing party system can have adverse effects on democratisation. For one, as Tomsa emphasised, it can lead to splits in these Islamist parties themselves, eventually driving the more conservative elements out of them. Moreover, if a sizeable segment of the electorate no longer feels accommodated by the existing polity – whether by its party system or its president – the outcome may well be populist mass mobilisation outside the formal political infrastructure. This is, we argue, what happened in Indonesia in late 2016.

Obviously, this does not mean that FPI's inclusion in the existing party system – as a stand-alone party, as desired by a significant percentage of voters – would be more conducive to democratic consolidation. Indeed, as the example of European party systems indicates (where right-wing parties openly operate within the existing polity), such inclusion can lead to a host of other, equally serious problems. We do, however, suggest that, in Indonesia, the long-term exclusion of the hard-line Muslim constituency from established party politics has led to widespread ignorance of, or confusion over, the size of this considerable electoral group. Yudhoyono, for his part, recognised the importance of this constituency – and arguably even over-estimated it, leading him to believe that he needed to enter into an informal pact with FPI and its followers. With FPI outside the party system, it was difficult for him to quantify its strength, and make adjustments accordingly. Jokowi, on the other hand, ignored FPI and other conservative Muslim groups, focusing instead on consolidating power in the existing political institutions. Thus, whereas Yudhoyono's uncertainty over FPI's appeal forced him into possibly unnecessary accommodation, Jokowi's ignorance of it helped to produce an unprecedented outbreak of Islamist populism on the streets.

This all suggests that future research must take the conservative and radical fringe of the Muslim electorate in Indonesia more seriously. Much research thus far has focused on Islamist terrorist cells in Indonesia (Ward, 2008; Jones, 2016; Chernov Hwang, 2017), but the extent to which conservative Muslim voters support an Islamist agenda has remained underexplored. While we believe that our data helps to gain a better understanding of this dimension of Indonesian politics, much more needs to be done. This includes investigating the state of the debate on the implementation of Islamic law at the national level in Indonesia – a debate many thought to be over after the 2002

rejection of the Jakarta Charter. Our data indicates that this debate has been artificially suspended by the moderation trends in the existing party system – but at least a quarter of the Muslim electorate remains committed to an Islamist agenda. And while overall support among the Indonesian population for conservative Islamist ideas is declining, the core of this constituency continues to consolidate its network. Getting a better analytical grasp on this group also involves taking a fresh look at FPI and other militant groups. While their origins and day-to-day operations have given them the image of thugs exploiting an Islamist platform for material purposes, this is not how many conservative Muslims view them. For these citizens, FPI and its affiliates represent a segment of Indonesian society that the post-Suharto polity, in its drive for democratic moderation, has systematically excluded.

Notes

1. We use the term “conservative Muslims” to denote scripturalist Muslims who believe that the original teachings of the Qur’an are the only source of political and moral guidance and should not be re-interpreted in the context of modernity and national state settings. “Radical”, on the other hand, is – in this context – defined as the preparedness to use violence to translate religiously conservative beliefs into action.
2. No comparable surveys on intolerance were done in 2012, 2013, 2014 and 2015. Hence, this data is not available for our research.
3. The 2016 LSI survey on intolerance was commissioned by the Wahid Institute.
4. This data was initially not included in the LSI 2016 report, but was processed for this article.
5. MUI issued a “religious stance and opinion” on the Ahok case on 11 October 2016, confirming that – in its view – Ahok had committed blasphemy. This decree – which according to MUI officials had a higher status than that of a fatwa – played a key role in legitimising the mass mobilisation against Ahok. See “Ketua MUI Sebut Keputusan MUI soal Ucapan Ahok Lebih Tinggi dari Fatwa”, *Kompas*, 31 January 2017.
6. This data was collected in a series of surveys: November 2004 (Centre for the Study of Islam and Society, PPIM); January 2006 (LSI); September 2006 (LSI); October-November 2006 (LSI); February-March 2007 (LSI); September 2007 (LSI); May-June 2008 (LSI); the three LSI intolerance surveys of 2010, 2011 and 2016; and a survey by SMRC from November 2016.
7. This data was initially not included in the LSI 2016 report, but was processed for this article.
8. “Habib Rizieq: Ayat Suci di Atas Ayat Konstitusi”, *Suara Islam*, 21 January 2015.
9. “SBY Tidak Suka Lihat Puser”, *Detik.com*, 24 March 2006.
10. “FPI Akan ‘Sweeping’ Tarian Telanjang”, *Kompas*, 31 December 2011.
11. “SBY Tidak Tolerir Kasus Ahmadiyah Terulang Lagi”, *Tribun News*, 7 February 2011.
12. Interview by Marcus Mietzner and Edward Aspinall, Cikeas, 2 December 2014.
13. “Tiap Tahun MUI Terima Rp 3 Miliar Dana APBN”, *Koran Tempo*, 12 March 2013.
14. “Majelis Dzikir SBY Nurussalam Menolak Disebut Sebagai Otak Aksi 4 November”, *Tribun News*, 21 November 2016; “Mengingat di Kempinski, Al-Khaththath Dibayari Ketua Parmusi”, *Detik.com*, 3 April 2017.
15. “Habib Rizieq Syihab: ‘Jokowi Pembawa Masalah dan Pengundang Musibah Bagi Umat Islam!’”, *Dunia Muallaf*, November 2014.

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