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Purist Salafis in Indonesia: Between Religious Belief and Demands of Democratic Governance

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SYNOPSIS

*The relationship between purist Salafis and politics in Indonesia is multifaceted and shaped by context and circumstances. **SYED HUZAIFAH BIN OTHMAN ALKAFF** notes that some purist Salafis' involvement in the country's elections serves their goal of convincing the public and the government that they are a part of society rather than a threat to it.*

COMMENTARY

With Indonesia slated to hold its next presidential and general elections in February 2024, political parties are preparing their candidates and will soon start campaigning to woo voters. Many are trying to sense the direction in which the election discourse is likely to head – whether it will reflect rising conservatism and Islamic-leaning politics, like the 2016 Jakarta gubernatorial election and 2019 presidential election did, or a different outlook altogether.

Indonesia has the world's largest Muslim population, with about 87% of the total population professing the Islamic faith. Indonesian Muslims are predominantly moderate and tolerant. But the influence of conservative Islamic groups is growing. These groups have become more visible in recent years, promoting a conservative Islamic agenda and advocating stricter adherence to Islamic laws and values. Also, such groups support political candidates who prioritise traditional values and religious beliefs.



There is speculation as to whether the election discourse of Indonesia's next presidential and general elections in February 2024 will reflect rising conservatism and Islamic-leaning politics under the growing influence of conservative Islamic groups, as the 2019 presidential election did, or take a different outlook altogether.

Image from Wikimedia Commons.

Among these groups are what are known as quietist Salafis, one of three categories of Salafis based on [Quintan Wiktorowicz's](#) seminal classification of Salafis, the other two being jihadi Salafis and political Salafis. Also known as purist Salafis, such Salafis reject as religious innovations with no precedence in Islamic teachings both the use of violence and participation in political parties and organisations. Another scholar, Jacob Olidort, [argues](#), however, that although quietist Salafis eschew political parties and organisations, they are not politically disengaged; they hold strong political views, and their commentaries and propaganda do shape the political discourse and people's political choices.

Purist Salafis in Indonesia

In Indonesia, purist Salafis are diverse and decentralised. They tend to focus on religious and social issues. Even if they do get involved in mainstream politics, they do so in a limited capacity and have specific political goals.

The purists do believe in and embrace certain aspects of Islamic political ideology. These include being loyal to the leader, having a political attitude versus participating in elections, and naturally preferring and supporting a Muslim as leader. Viewing politics from outside the parliamentary process, their perceptions of the government and its policies tend to shift frequently. More precisely, it is not political power per se that interests them; instead, their goal is to ensure that the governance of the country accommodates their distinct version of Islam.

The relationship between purist Salafis and democracy is dense and often contentious. Some strands of purist Salafis decline to support the idea of democracy in Indonesia. They view democracy as a Western import that is contradictory to Islamic values. Other purist Salafis are less ill disposed towards democracy, accepting it as a means of promoting their social and religious agendas. Hence, some Salafi religious scholars do try to influence their followers and the public to vote for their preferred candidates in elections.

The purist Salafis often [claim](#) that political agitation, political parties and the parliamentary system are not part of their methodology (*manhaj*). Instead, they contend that a Salafi's task should be to re-educate society about the proper "methodological" approach to all matters that affect Muslims, including politics.

Therefore, their involvement in elections is intended to serve their purpose of convincing the public and the government that they are playing an active role as a part of society rather than posing a threat to it. Although it may seem that the purist Salafis possess their own political views and agendas, they operate within Indonesia's broader political context – a part of a democratic and pluralistic society. Through this approach, they have been able to navigate the tensions and challenges that arise from their participation in the political process, including balancing their religious beliefs and values with the demands of democratic governance.

Between Political Parties and Purist Salafis

The relationship between political parties and the purist Salafis can be described as a mix of competition, conflict, and cooperation, albeit of a transactional character. While some parties view the Salafis as a threat to Indonesian society's secular and pluralistic disposition, others seek to court them to appeal to their religious bases or gain their votes in elections. In some cases, politicians forge alliances or coalitions with the purist Salafis or seek their assistance to mobilise the populace to either further their political agendas or gain support for their policies.

For their part, the purist Salafis have their own agendas and priorities, which may or may not align with those of mainstream politicians. Some purist Salafis attempt to influence politics and policies through their indirect involvement in the political process. They would typically pressure politicians to adopt policies that align with their religious and social agendas or to oppose policies that they view as contrary to their beliefs and values.

Conclusion

Participation in politics is not universally considered crucial among the purist Salafi community in Indonesia. Purist Salafis often prioritise religious teachings, community welfare, and individual piety over direct involvement in the political process. They view engagement in politics as secondary or unnecessary. Thus, their participation in politics is merely a means to achieve their goals; their main preoccupation is to engage in religious and social activism. The importance of political participation among purist Salafis in Indonesia can change depending on the specific group or individual's beliefs and strategies.

For their part, some political parties and their candidates, particularly those seeking to appeal to conservative or religiously oriented voters, see purist Salafis as a significant constituency to cultivate. As a distinct group within the larger Muslim population, purist Salafis can have considerable influence in specific regions or communities where their presence is vital.

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