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Prabowo's Inclusive Cabinet: Accommodating Indonesia's Islamic Factions for Political Cohesion

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SYNOPSIS

*The new cabinet formed by Indonesian president Prabowo Subianto includes representatives of all major Islamic parties and organisations in Indonesia. **Alexander R Arifianto** and **Aisah Putri Budiarti** argue that this inclusion indicates the new president's willingness to accommodate all Islamic factions and promote political cohesion.*

COMMENTARY

Shortly after his inauguration on 20 October 2024, Indonesia's new president, Prabowo Subianto, announced a large and diverse cabinet of ministers, deputy ministers and agency heads to guide his administration over the next five years. Notably, the cabinet includes significant representation from all major Indonesian Islamic parties and organisations, underscoring the new president's willingness to accommodate all Islamic factions and promote political cohesion.

Prabowo's new cabinet not only includes representatives from Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) — Indonesia's largest Islamic organisation — and its semi-affiliated political party, the National Awakening Party (PKB), but also those from Muhammadiyah — Indonesia's second largest Islamic organisation — and two small Islamist-leaning parties, the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) and the Indonesian People's Wave Party (Gelora). The latter two parties represent the *Tarbiyah* ("religious nurturing") movement inspired by the transnational Muslim Brotherhood ideology. Several smaller Islamic organisations are also prominently represented, further underscoring Prabowo's commitment to broad-based political inclusion.

The inclusion of Islamic parties and organisations in Prabowo's new cabinet means that he has successfully united all three ideological streams driving political Islam in

Indonesia since the beginning of the country's *Reformasi* era in 1998. The three streams are: [traditionalist Islam](#) (primarily represented by NU), [modernist Islam](#) (primarily represented by Muhammadiyah), and [transnational Islam](#) (primarily represented by PKS).

The three streams not only divide Indonesian Islam by ideological orientation but also by socio-economic background. NU followers tend to be rural Muslims from lower-middle-income backgrounds who work in agriculture and semi-skilled professions, while Muhammadiyah followers tend to be more urbanised and come from the ranks of upper-middle-income professionals (doctors and lawyers). *Tarbiyah* followers are upper-middle-income professionals who have received tertiary education overseas in engineering or the natural sciences.



Newly inaugurated Indonesian president Prabowo Subianto announced a large and diverse cabinet on 20 October 2024. This underscores his willingness to promote Indonesian unity and political cohesion. *Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

Cabinet Representation under Jokowi

During his decade-long presidency, Prabowo's predecessor Joko Widodo ("Jokowi") sought political support from the traditionalist NU because of its status as Indonesia's largest Islamic organisation. Jokowi largely relied on the NU leadership's political support as he faced [a challenge from Islamists](#) who questioned his political legitimacy by sponsoring the 2016-2017 Action to Defend Islam (212) rallies. Thanks to NU's support, Jokowi managed to overcome this challenge by proscribing Islamist organisations that were the primary sponsors of the 212 rallies — including [Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia \(HTI\)](#) and the [Islamic Defenders Front \(FPI\)](#). Deterred by these bans, other Islamist organisations — including PKS — ceased further criticising Jokowi. Many of them [chose to be politically inactive](#) during the 2024 Indonesian general election campaigns.

During Jokowi's second term, [five cabinet posts](#) were given to NU and PKB-affiliated clerics and politicians, including Vice President Ma'ruf Amin and Minister of Religious Affairs Yaquut Cholil Qomas. On the other hand, despite receiving support from some Muhammadiyah activists, Jokowi gave only one cabinet and one deputy ministerial positions to politicians from the organisation. Hence, during the presidential campaign season from November 2023 to February 2024, Muhammadiyah lobbied the Prabowo team to [include more of its members in his cabinet](#) — particularly in the Ministry of Education, which had several Muhammadiyah ministers in the initial post-*Reformasi* period.

Throughout both of Jokowi's presidential terms, the PKS had no representation in his cabinet. This exclusion stemmed from the party's consistent support in the [2014](#) and [2019](#) elections for Prabowo, Jokowi's rival for the presidency. Additionally, [PKS's ideological stance contrasts](#) sharply with that of the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P), Jokowi's primary political ally during much of his presidency.

Muhammadiyah and NU's Representation in the Prabowo Cabinet

Muhammadiyah's lobbying efforts have paid off as Prabowo has appointed a total of [seven of its religious leaders and politicians](#) to his cabinet. They include Abdul Mu'ti, the organisation's general secretary, who has been appointed as minister of primary and secondary education; Raja Juli Antoni, a politician from the Indonesian Solidarity Party (PSI) as minister of forestry; and Dahnil Anzar Simanjuntak from Prabowo's Gerindra Party, who serves as deputy head of the newly created Agency for Hajj and Umrah Affairs. In addition, four politicians from the [National Mandate Party \(PAN\)](#), which is semi-affiliated with Muhammadiyah, received ministerial appointments. They include PAN chair Zulkifli Hasan as coordinating minister of food affairs and Bima Arya Sugiarto as deputy minister of home affairs.

Nonetheless, NU-affiliated clerics and politicians have the most cabinet appointments. [10 persons with NU backgrounds](#) serve in the cabinet, including Nasaruddin Umar, a member of NU's national leadership board as minister of religious affairs; Nusron Wahid, a Golkar Party member who is minister of agrarian affairs and spatial planning; and Irfan Yusuf, a Gerindra Party member, who serves as head of the aforesaid Agency for Hajj and Umrah Affairs.

Apart from accommodating key Islamic groups, an interesting aspect of Prabowo's cabinet selection approach lies in his effort to bridge the gap dividing opposing factions within NU. Since 2021, when Yahya Cholil Staquf replaced Said Aqil Siradj as chairman of the Nahdlatul Ulama Executive Board (PBNU), [NU has been sharply divided between the PBNU faction and the PKB faction](#). This rift peaked recently as each faction sought to change the leadership of the opposing faction to install leaders aligned with their interests. These efforts ultimately failed. PBNU remains under Staquf's leadership while PKB remains under the leadership of Muhaimin Iskandar.

Faced with this conflict, Prabowo avoided siding with either faction in favour of accommodating both. Muhaimin was appointed as coordinating minister for community empowerment, while Abdul Kadir Karding, another PKB politician, was made minister of protection of Indonesian migrant workers. Meanwhile, Saifullah

Yusuf, PBNU secretary-general and a close ally of Staquf, was appointed as minister of social affairs, alongside four other NU-affiliated administrators.

Other Islamic Groups' Representation in the New Cabinet

Prabowo has also included several figures from the transnational *Tarbiyah* movement. Although the *Tarbiyah* movement has a smaller presence in Indonesia than the traditionalist NU and modernist Muhammadiyah groups, it has regained cabinet representation after a 10-year absence. Yassierli, a PKS member and a professor from the Bandung Institute of Technology, has been appointed as the new minister of manpower. Despite backing Anies Baswedan's presidential bid, PKS decided to join Prabowo's coalition after the election, rekindling its support for him, as it had done in the 2014 and 2019 elections. Meanwhile, the Gelora Party, a PKS splinter party which supported Prabowo throughout his 2024 campaign, has two representatives in the cabinet. They are [Anis Matta](#), who is a deputy minister of foreign affairs, and [Fahri Hamzah](#), who is a deputy minister of housing and settlement.

In addition to NU, Muhammadiyah and the *Tarbiyah* movement, Prabowo's cabinet also includes members of other Islamic parties, including the Crescent and Star Party (PBB). Its chairman, [Yusril Ihza Mahendra](#), has been appointed coordinating minister for legal, human rights, immigration, and correctional affairs.

However, there are several conservative Islamist organisations that have been excluded from Prabowo's cabinet line-up. They include the Indonesian Islamic Da'wah Council (DDII), which was founded in 1967 by the late Mohammad Natsir, a former Indonesian prime minister. The organisation is widely considered among conservative Islamists as the [successor to the long defunct Masyumi Party](#). Masyumi was the largest Indonesian Islamic party during the 1950s until it was disbanded in 1960 by Soekarno, the country's founding president. In addition, FPI and its leader, Rizieq Shihab, have also been excluded from the cabinet. FPI supported Prabowo's presidential bid in 2014 and 2019.

Concluding Remarks

Unlike Jokowi, who did not include many Islamic groups in his cabinet apart from NU, Prabowo has included representatives from all the major and influential Islamic factions. As president of a Muslim-majority country, Prabowo aims to bring key religious groups into his governing coalition to ensure stability and reduce opposition within his government. Although he has allocated the most seats to NU figures by virtue of the organisation being the largest in the country, he has also distributed cabinet positions fairly equitably to Muhammadiyah, *Tarbiyah*-affiliated parties, and other Islamic parties, ensuring a more balanced representation.

The inclusion of all the aforesaid Islamic parties and organisations has been hailed by Prabowo's supporters as measures to promote Indonesian unity and political cohesion. Nonetheless, several issues remain unaddressed. Firstly, with 109 members, [Prabowo's cabinet is the second largest Indonesian cabinet ever](#). His two immediate predecessors — Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and Jokowi — had cabinets with just shy of 40 ministers each. Indonesian political analysts note that consensus was already difficult to achieve in the cabinets of both these predecessors owing to

the many parties, organisations and personalities represented. Based on this difficulty, they expect Prabowo's cabinet to face similar cooperation and collaboration dilemmas, particularly since the size of his cabinet is nearly three times that of each of his two predecessors' cabinets.

Secondly, existing ideological, political and personality-based rivalries both within and among the Islamic parties and organisations represented in the cabinet may create difficulties for them to work together to enact and implement the new president's policy agenda. This is particularly so among Islamic affairs ministries, which have been organisationally divided in Prabowo's cabinet. Two new ministerial-level agencies — respectively the [Agency for Hajj and Umrah Affairs](#) and the [Agency for Halal Product Assurances](#) — have been carved out from the Ministry of Religious Affairs. The combination of ideological division and bureaucratic rivalry among these ministries and agencies, if not managed well, may create further difficulties for them to deliver high-quality public services for Indonesian Muslims.

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