

## The missing middle



**A conservative turn in Indonesian Islam helps explain why issues like religion and blasphemy have shaped Jakarta's election and plagued incumbent governor Ahok. Moderates need to regroup and act as effective counterpoints against these developments, otherwise the image of a 'smiling and tolerant Islam' is at risk, writes Alexander R Arifianto.**

The strongest organised opposition against the candidacy of Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (popularly known as Ahok) as Jakarta's next governor comes from a resurgent Islamist movement. United under the banner of the National Movement to Guard the Indonesian Ulama Council's Edict (GPFMUI), these groups included the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI), Islamic Followers Forum (FUI), Justice and Development Party (PKS), and at least two dozen smaller Islamist groups. By unifying their message to call for Ahok's resignation and arrest, they managed to organise three mass rallies in Jakarta, on 4 November and 2 December 2016, and 11 February 2017 and brought together millions of Muslims to participate in these rallies.

Previous *New Mandala* articles (for instance [here](#) and [here](#)) have focused on the role of these organisations to mobilise anti-Ahok rallies and the inadequate action of the state to counter them.

What's been overlooked is why the opposition against the mass rallies from moderate Indonesian Islamic groups has been timid at best and ineffective at worst. This is especially so from Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah -- two leading moderate Islamic groups with a combined followership of approximately 100 million Indonesian Muslims. While senior leaders of [both organisations](#) have repeatedly condemned the Islamists as not representing the voices of Indonesian Muslims and called for their followers [not to join the rallies](#), these pleas have been ignored by tens of thousands of clerics and activists from both groups, who have joined in the anti-Ahok rallies as well as smaller rallies in other cities throughout Indonesia.

There are several reasons that explain the lack of moderate Islamic opposition against the Islamists. First, both NU and Muhammadiyah are sharply divided both theologically and politically. Internal rivalries within both groups have resulted in the diverging political allegiances of different NU and Muhammadiyah figures to different gubernatorial candidates. Second and more troublingly, the lack of strong moderate voices from NU and Muhammadiyah is a sign of growing conservatism in Indonesian Islam that has not only strengthened the power of Islamists, but has also affected the ranks of NU and Muhammadiyah members as well.

NU is fraught with much internal rivalries and divisions, which helps to explain the diverging positions taken by NU activists regarding the Ahok issue. This can be seen in a religious rally (*istighosah*) organised on 5 February 2017 in order to solidify support for Ahok by NU-affiliated voters in Jakarta. The rally was organised by [Nusron Wahid](#), a NU activist who is affiliated with the Golkar Party and is a member of Ahok's campaign team (*tim sukses*). Hence, it was not officially endorsed by NU's Jakarta Branch. A day after the rally, the latter issued a statement [disavowing](#) any involvement with the rally and instead, called for NU members "to refrain from supporting Ahok in the gubernatorial election." NU Jakarta Branch is considered to be close to Ma'ruf Amin, a conservative senior NU cleric who is also the general chairman of Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI). Amin was instrumental in the issuance of the MUI fatwa condemning Ahok [for blasphemy](#), is a close associate of former President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, and has [endorsed the candidacy of his son Agus Yudhoyono](#), as Jakarta Governor.

Similar divisions can be seen within Muhammadiyah. While the organisation's current chairman Haedar Nashir has strongly condemned the anti-Ahok rallies and urged Muhammadiyah members [not to join them](#), Amien Rais, a former chairman of the organisation, has been very vocal in condemning the allegedly blasphemous act committed by Ahok and was [featured prominently](#) as a speaker in the rallies. Din Syamsuddin, another former Muhammadiyah chairman, has also condemned Ahok's alleged action and has stated he will lead a 'resistance' movement should Ahok not be [brought to justice](#). The three Muhammadiyah leaders came from different factions within the organisation and their long rivalries have resulted in diverging opinions regarding Ahok. This contributes to the diverging actions of Muhammadiyah activists – [some have joined the rallies](#) while others have refused to do so.

However, the lack of strong moderate Islamic response against rallies can also be attributed to a

phenomena [first identified by Martin van Bruinessen](#) as a growing ‘conservative turn’ within numerous Indonesian Islamic organisations, including in NU and Muhammadiyah. Growing slowly but surely over the past few decades, conservative Islamist theology from the Middle East has gained popular following across the broad spectrum of Indonesia’s Islamic organisations.

For instance, campus religious propagation (*da’wa*) groups sponsored by PKS-affiliated Indonesian Muslim University Students Action Union (KAMMI), HTI, and other Islamist groups, have become the predominant campus organisations in numerous state universities over the past [few decades](#). Islamist groups have also been active in promoting their own prayer groups (*pengajian*) and study circles (*halaqah*) that are open to all interested Muslims – including NU and Muhammadiyah followers. These developments have helped to close the theological gaps between conservative and moderate Islamic groups that once divided them in previous decades.

More young NU theology students (*santri*) are pursuing their advanced study in Middle Eastern countries such as Saudi Arabia and Yemen, in which literalist Islamic curriculum have replaced the more moderate and flexible curriculums that their predecessors were taught less than a generation or two ago. Upon their return to Indonesia, these young clerics have established new organisations such as the ‘True Path’ NU (*NU Garis Lurus*) and the *Ahlu Sunnah wal Jamaah* Movement of Greater Malang (*Gama!*), in order to promote Islamist theology among the NU ranks. These organisations represent a direct challenge to the moderate and pluralist theology promoted by the late Abdurrahman Wahid and his [successors within the NU](#) over the past three decades.

In short, the ‘conservative turn’ in Indonesian Islam has resulted in an ideological convergence among the Islamists and theologically conservative NU and Muhammadiyah activists, which unite these groups to promote common political causes – whether it is local *shari’a* law (*perda shari’a*) at numerous localities [throughout Indonesia](#) or to express opposition against perceived ‘enemies of Islam’ such as Ahok nationally. Groups such as NU [Garis Lurus](#) and [Gama!](#) from the NU ranks and the Muhammadiyah University Students Association ([Ikatan Mahasiswa Muhammadiyah – IMM](#)) participated heavily in the anti-Ahok rallies as an act of theological and political solidarity with their Islamist counterparts.

Internal political divisions within NU and Muhammadiyah and the growing conservatism among some clerics and activists from both organisations, helps explain the lack of stronger opposition from moderate Islamic voices in Indonesia against the highly organised anti-Ahok actions sponsored by Islamists. Moderates within both groups need to regroup and refocus their attention to act as effective counterpoints against these groups and to discipline conservative activists within their own ranks.

Otherwise, the image of a ‘smiling and moderate’ Islam that still constitutes a ‘silent majority’ in today’s Indonesia can potentially be replaced with an ‘angry and intolerant’ Islamism over the next decade or so.

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