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Indonesian Islamist populism and Anies Baswedan

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BIO

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ABSTRACT

Anies Baswedan emerges as a pivotal figure in Indonesian Islamist populism, notably for his role in defeating Basuki Tjahaya Purnama (Ahok) in the 2016 Jakarta gubernatorial election and his involvement in the criminalization of Ahok's blasphemy case. His influence has fueled the rise of Islamist populism in the post-reform democratization era. Anies's recent announcement as the National Democratic Party's (Nasdem) presidential candidate for the 2024 election positions him against Ganjar Pranowo and Prabowo Subianto. This article scrutinizes Anies's prospects in the 2024 presidential election, exploring whether he continues to employ identity politics and Islamist ideologies to attack political opponents and what his overall stance is regarding Islamist populism. It raises pertinent questions about the impact of these developments on Indonesian democracy, pondering whether the looming challenges will culminate in storms or pave the way for clearer skies in the nation's democratic landscape.

By Hasnan Bachtiar*

Scholarly discourse on the future of democracy in Indonesia frequently paints a grim picture, characterized by regression (Hadiz, 2017; Warburton & Aspinall, 2019; Aspinall & Mietzner, 2019). Thomas P. Power (2018) even confidently highlights the emergence of authoritarian tendencies within the Joko Widodo (Jokowi) administration in response to a conservative shift and the concurrent rise of Islamist populism that threatens his authority. Jokowi's argument revolves around the notion that economic development necessitates social and political stability, akin to the approach adopted during the Suharto regime. In the name of stability, that era witnessed the emergence of the 'Reformasi 1998' political style and people power, ultimately leading to the downfall of authoritarianism. However, the contemporary global context presents additional challenges, as countries worldwide grapple with the economic fallout of the Covid-19 pandemic.

A year later, as economic recovery seemed promising, the Russian-Ukrainian conflict further exacerbated the global economic crisis. Consequently, the government shifted its focus from economic development to crisis management. To safeguard the success of Jokowi's development initiatives, diverse strategies have been employed to secure investment programs, including the contentious Omnibus Act, designed to offer added protection to investors (Mahy, 2022). These laws, which are imperfect and often detrimental to the populace, have faced critical opposition, particularly from people involved in populist movements. This unfolding situation occurs within a complex political landscape marked by the influence of oligarchic actors and persistent corruption. Consequently, the government has engaged in various negotiations, formed coalitions, and employed repression tactics tailored to the specific context, resulting in limited access to freedom for individuals and interest groups.

This intricate process also implicates various political actors and Islamist populism. Notably, Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) and the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) have swallowed bitter pills and faced government bans due to their perceived threat to state ideology and security. Both Islamist populist movements espouse anti-diversity and anti-minority religious ideologies. The FPI is further entangled in acts of intolerance, religious-based persecution, intimidation, often accompanied by violence and vigilantism. Its existence poses a challenge to democracy, albeit its dissolution raises concerns of repressive measures.

Anies Baswedan emerges as a key figure in Indonesian Islamist populism, propelled by his role in defeating Basuki Tjahaya Purnama (a.k.a. Ahok) in the 2016 Jakarta gubernatorial election and his involvement in Ahok's blasphemy case (Mietzner and Muhtadi, 2018). He is a catalyst for the rise of Islamist populism, which has found particular expression in the post-reform democratization. Anies has been announced as the National Democratic Party's (Nasdem) presidential candidate,

poised to challenge Ganjar Pranowo and Prabowo Subianto in the 2024 presidential election (Shafira, 2022). This article delves into Anies's prospects in the 2024 election, examining whether he still employs identity politics exploiting emotions and Islamist ideology to attack his political opponents, while also assessing his overall attitude towards Islamist populism. Ultimately, this article contemplates whether the looming clouds over Indonesian democracy will lead to rainstorms or yield clear skies.



Jakarta Governor Anies Baswedan spoke about data on people infected with the Corona virus in City Hall on March 23, 2020 in Jakarta, Indonesia. Photo: Wulandari Wulandari.

Who is Anies Baswedan?

Anies Baswedan, born on May 7, 1969, in Kuningan, West Java, is the son of Rasyid Baswedan (father) and Aliyah Rasyid (mother). Notably, he is the grandson of Abdurrahman Baswedan, a national hero, Masyumi figure, populist, and leader of a political movement that harnessed the power of Arab descendants to fight for Indonesian independence (Siallagan, 2022).

He commenced his undergraduate studies in economics at Gadjah Mada University, Yogyakarta, in 1995. Two years later, he completed his master's degree in International Economic and Security Policy at the School of Public Affairs, University of Maryland, US. In 2005, he obtained his PhD in the field of politics from Northern Illinois University, with a thesis entitled "Regional Autonomy and Patterns of Democracy in Indonesia."

Armed with this impressive academic background, Anies embarked on a teaching career at Paramadina University. This institution, guided by Indonesia's esteemed figure of pluralism and tolerance, Nurcholish Madjid, instilled the values of virtue in higher education. Anies excelled in

role, ultimately becoming the most influential figure on campus. He served as the university's rector and initiated the 'Indonesia Mengajar' program, renowned for inviting top volunteers from across the nation and deploying them to the farthest and most remote areas to serve as teachers in foundational schools.

Subsequently, Anies was appointed as the Minister of Education and Culture in Jokowi's cabinet, although his tenure was interrupted by a reshuffle. Nevertheless, his career continued to flourish. He contested the 2016 Jakarta gubernatorial election, securing victory over the incumbent Governor Ahok and Agus Harimurti Yudhoyono (AHY), the son of former Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY). Leveraging his experience as the head of the capital, Anies emerged as a presidential candidate for the 2024 election under the Nasdem party ticket.

Anies and the 2024 Presidential Election



Poster in Yogyakarta, Indonesia supporting Anies Baswedan to become president on September 1, 2023. Photo: Mbah Purwo.

Anies could be portrayed as one of the intellectual actors who mobilized Islamist populism in the lead-up to the 2016 gubernatorial election and the 2019 presidential elections. He is often characterized as a figure involved in the intricate realm of politics, where space is provided for intolerant and discriminatory political actions. By employing the identity politics of Islamism, he advocated for the general will of the Muslim majority to stand against an unjust ruling regime. His political maneuvers were shaped by invoking the religious primordialism of the Islamist masses in their struggle against corrupt elites.

However, people tend to overlook his role as a political spokesperson for Jokowi in the 2014 presidential election (Akuntono 2014). He stood by Jokowi's side and eventually assumed a prominent

position in the cabinet, serving as Indonesia's Minister of Education and Culture. In this context, Anies was aligned with the same political group that presents itself as the defender of diversity. Nevertheless, his political shift in 2016 led to a significant victory as the Governor of Jakarta, alongside his deputy, Sandiaga Uno. In 2019, he threw his support behind Prabowo Subianto and Sandiaga Uno, who were challenging Jokowi's presidency. Despite their eventual defeat, both eventually found a place in Jokowi's cabinet, as Minister of Defense and Minister of Tourism respectively.

As we approach the 2024 election, Anies's electability has surged. According to Drone Emprit data, which analyzes the frequency of certain political figures' names on Twitter using the keyword "Anies Baswedan," he is the most discussed figure among the public (Rahman, 2022). However, it's essential to assess what proportion of voters and Twitter users actively engage in campaign-related discussions, debates, and political discourse. Similarly, in polls conducted by various institutions, Anies consistently secures a place in the top three positions, competing with Prabowo and Ganjar Pranowo. With strong electability, Anies has been nominated as a presidential candidate by the Nasdem party.

Naturally, announcing his candidacy early, before other candidates are officially revealed, carries risks, particularly concerning the formation of coalitions with other parties. Currently, Nasdem is in a coalition with the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) and the National Awakening Party (PKB). However, their former partner, the Democratic Party (Demokrat), withdrew from the coalition, feeling betrayed when Anies was instead paired with PKB chairman Muhaimin Iskandar as the vice-presidential candidate. The Democratic Party advocates for Anies to be paired with AHY.

Without the Democratic Party in the Anies-Muhaimin coalition, it appears to have surpassed the parliamentary threshold of 25 percent based on previous votes in the House of Representatives (DPR). Nasdem holds 10.26 percent of the seats in the DPR, PKS holds 8.7 percent, and PKB holds 10.09 percent (Huda, 2023). Their combined coalition share reaches 29.05 percent. In contrast, their rival Ganjar, under the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP) umbrella, commands 22.26 percent support and is backed by the United Development Party (PPP), which holds 3.30 percent (totaling 25.56 percent). Meanwhile, Prabowo's Great Indonesia Movement Party (Gerindra) has 13.57 percent support, with backing from Golongan Karya (Golkar) at 14.78 percent, the National Mandate Party (PAN) at 7.65 percent, and the Democratic Party at 9.39 percent (totaling 45.39 percent).

Currently, Anies's political coalition holds a higher percentage of DPR seats than Ganjar's coalition but still falls significantly short of Prabowo's alliance. If Anies is able to win the vote in the first phase of the election, the political map may change. Anies faces a challenging path forward, as does his political coalition. The Anies-Muhaimin coalition is expected to secure

substantial votes from followers of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Indonesia's largest Muslim organization. PKB, a political party founded by prominent NU figure Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur), plays a pivotal role in this regard. Interestingly, during the NU's centenary celebrations in Sidoarjo on February 7, 2023, numerous state officials associated with the PDIP were prominently featured. Concurrently, Muhaimin Iskandar, with a 'Nahdliyyin' (NU follower) background, appeared to be absent. However, there was a so-called PKB-ization of the NU, a party with a large mass that he wrested from its founder Gus Dur.

With all these complexities, Anies still has a chance to win the battle against Ganjar and Prabowo, provided he secures the votes in Jakarta, West Java, and a substantial number of votes in East Java. To secure the major voting pockets, he needs to convince the parties that have endorsed him. On September 27, he met with the FPI's Grand Imam, Rizieq Shihab, in an attempt to secure the support of the Islamist populist group. Concurrently, the leader of the NU, KH Yahya Cholil Staquf, declared that he would never support a political coalition that included religious groups threatening the nation's unity.

Anies is making efforts to convince his Islamist populist followers that he won't betray them, emphasizing pluralism, kindness to minorities, and opening doors to Chinese conglomerates and oligarchs—a formidable and almost impossible task. This is what was discussed during Anies's interview with ABC News (2023). He asserted that his work in Jakarta demonstrates his leadership for all, characterized by non-discrimination, non-intolerance, and service to people regardless of their backgrounds.

It will be a gamble for him, unless he adopts a pragmatic approach to secure his political position first, recognizing that in the political arena in a political battle, betrayal can be both normal and tolerable. His experience with Jokowi has enabled him to counteract Islamist populism and mitigate the trend toward religious conservatism.



DKI Jakarta Governor Anies Baswedan with residents of Kampung Akuarium in Jakarta, Indonesia on April 14 2018. Photo: Shutterstock.

Anies' Political Maneuver an Islamist Populism

The greatest fear of a nation whose motto is unity in diversity is disintegration. The possibility of disintegration can result from fragmentation. Social fragmentation within society encourages the sharpening of differences, ultimately leading to various social and political frictions. Frictions that escape government control can escalate into conflicts. This becomes a serious problem when not adequately and properly managed. The problem is that Indonesia has faced significant polarization in electoral politics, particularly exacerbated when religious symbols, especially Islam as the majority religion, become embroiled.

In 2016, a year seen as preparatory for the 2019 realpolitik contest, religious symbols indisputably became a catalyst for intense social and political polarization. During the Jakarta gubernatorial election, incumbent governor Basuki Tjahaya Purnama, known as Ahok, faced off against Anies Baswedan. This contest sadly involved the influence of identity politics (Islamism) and a substantial mobilization of supporters for Anies. Ahok faced accusations of blasphemy and was ultimately sentenced to prison. His supposed blasphemy occurred when he criticized political figures who invoked Surat al-Maidah in their election campaigns, aiming to expose the use of religion for political gain. In response, Anies, as part of a broader strategy, mobilized Islamist populism to protest against

his political opponent, orchestrating a large-scale mass action known as Islamist populism.

In this context, populism assumes the form of resistance to Ahok, who is perceived as a political symbol aligning with corrupt ruling elites. These elites are viewed as corrupt because populists argue they often disregard or violate the general will of the people. Ahok, a political figure belonging to both religious and racial minorities (Christian and Chinese), is seen as a powerful minority who has not favored the Muslim majority. He stands accused of undermining justice and the welfare of the people from the perspective of Anies' group.

Therefore, the populism unfolding is primarily characterized by criticism, resistance, the struggle of the majority (Muslims and the oppressed) against an elite minority (Ahok) seen as oppressors, foreign lackeys, servitors of the West and China, and a perceived threat to the development of the ummah's civilization (Yilmaz, Morieson & Bachtiar, 2022). In this narrative, realpolitik actors like Anies are portrayed as champions of Muslim civilization, with Anies even being likened to Abu Bakar al-Shiddiq (a friend of the Prophet Muhammad), a figure described as patient, wise, and possessing good leadership qualities (Kumparan, 2017). This form of populism typically exploits rhetoric centered on civilization, which starkly contrasts 'us' with 'them,' emphasizing cultural and religious differences (Yilmaz & Morieson, 2023).

Following Ahok's defeat, Anies assumed the influential position of 'Jakarta 1,' symbolizing the capital's most prominent figure. However, Rizieq Shihab, the founder of the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), faced a different fate. He became a target of the government, accused of being an intellectual actor of Islamist populism posing a threat to national security. In 2016, he managed to mobilize masses from cross-class alliances to enter the political arena against the corrupt elites and others. He then fled to Saudi Arabia. Upon his return to Indonesia, he was arrested for organizing a mass rally during the Covid-19 pandemic, which resulted in the shooting of his six supporters by the police and the banning of the FPI.

Upon his release on parole, Rizieq Shihab reconnected with Anies. In a baptism-like ceremony, in the presence of Rizieq Shihab's recitation congregation, Anies was hailed as a leader who had fulfilled his promise as a governor favoring Muslims (Kumparan, 2022). He was contrasted with typical political figures who often renege on their commitments once in power. Rizieq asserted that Anies was different and deemed him a potential candidate for the presidency in Indonesia's 2024 election, indicating that Anies had become the preferred choice of Islamist populists. However, as of October 2023, the Islamist populist movement has shown no signs of emerging as a large-scale political maneuver involving mass mobilizations.

Anies was respectfully dismissed by President Joko Widodo on October 16, 2022, based on Presidential Decree No. 100/P of 2022.

Since then, Anies has begun mobilizing political forces to secure victory in the forthcoming 2024 presidential election. On October 3, 2022, Anies was officially declared a presidential candidate by Nasdem's leader, Surya Paloh. When asked why Anies Baswedan was chosen, Surya Paloh responded, "Why not? He is the best," during a press conference at the Nasdem Tower in Jakarta (Savitri, 2022). Additionally, before party officials, Surya Paloh emphasized, "There is no time for us to think and give intolerant thoughts, tolerance is for those who give tolerance. True nationalism, true national thoughts are associated with attitudes that are full of tolerance and that is what Nasdem is fighting for," (Savitri, 2022).

Subsequently, other parties, including PKS, PKB, and Demokrat, initially voiced their support for Anies, although Demokrat later withdrew. It's worth noting that Nasdem had previously aligned itself with the victorious PDIP. This means that Nasdem's stance opposes the Islamist populist movement. In contrast, PKS favors populism and had disassociated from the coalition with Gerindra, the party of another presidential candidate, Prabowo. This shift toward emphasizing tolerance and nationalism, as opposed to Islamist populism's rhetoric, is indicative of Anies' evolving political maneuvering style. Nasdem's expectation is for Anies to win the battle by winning the sympathy of voters outside the Islamist populist group. This does not mean that voters from Islamist populist circles or those who sympathize with identity politics of Islam should be ignored. The goal is for these voters to rally behind Anies rather than Prabowo.

Previously, both Anies and Prabowo had employed Islamist populism as a tool to challenge the ruling government, whether it was Ahok or Jokowi. However, shortly after Prabowo's defeat in the 2019 presidential election, he accepted Jokowi's offer to join his cabinet, assuming the pivotal role of Minister of Defense. While this move may have appeared rational, it somewhat eroded the trust of Islamist populist groups in Prabowo. Consequently, these groups shifted their support from Prabowo to Anies. With the additional votes from a diverse electorate less concerned with identity politics, Anies has a chance to outperform Ganjar. The Islamic populist movement may continue to play a role in Anies' political strategy, albeit with a reduced emphasis on Islamist identity politics, if not its complete elimination.

The change in Anies' political maneuvering style is evident in an interview with Solo Pos. When asked, "Can Pak Anies ensure that he will be a leader for all Indonesian people when he becomes president?" Anies responded, "I have worked in Jakarta for five years. Can you show me Anies' policies that are intolerant, discriminatory, not inclusive, that reflect partisan views? So don't ask about the future, because anyone can boast in front of you. Ask about the track record. ...I can show you that in Jakarta we have the best democracy index, the best tolerance... even in cohesiveness (also the best). This is based on a study by Nanyang Technological University. In Jakarta there is no

polarization, there is cohesiveness. Where is the polarization? On social media. There is no polarization in the community," (Baswedan 2023).

Clearly, Anies' real identity still remains uncertain. He may indeed be a pluralist, but it is also possible that he is ideologically aligned with staunch defenders of Islamism. As an academic and the rector of Paramadina University, a campus influenced by the progressive Muslim scholar Nurcholish Madjid, Anies understands the importance of fostering Indonesian pluralism. However, in politics, ideologies can change and adapt to serve one's political interests. What the public can comprehend in this context is an adherence to an ideology that advances personal political ambitions. Anies' moderation of Islamism, his role as a defender of diversity, and his efforts toward a more pro-equality, anti-discrimination, and tolerant form of Islamism may be driven by pragmatic political considerations rather than a fundamental shift to democratic post-Islamism, as proposed by Asef Bayat (2013). What is certain is that his ultimate goal appears to be securing practical political victories.

CONCLUSION

The public views Anies Baswedan not only as a potential presidential candidate but also as a prominent figure who played a crucial role in the Islamist populist movement during his bid for the governor's seat in the Jakarta gubernatorial election. He was a central figure in the process that led to Ahok's imprisonment, a symbol of political elites from religious and ethnic minority backgrounds. However, as the 2024 election draws near, Anies' style of political maneuvering has undergone a transformation. Acting upon the advice of Nasdem, the party that endorsed him as a presidential candidate, Anies now presents himself as a figure committed to upholding the values of equality, tolerance, and nationalism.

In his recent article titled "Meluruskan Jalan, Menghadirkan Keadilan (Straightening the Path, Presenting Justice)" in Kompas (February 17, 2023), Anies expressed, "The essence of democracy is to provide equal space for all. Presenting legal certainty and security by guaranteeing the rights of citizens, especially safe spaces for women, children, people with disabilities, indigenous peoples and marginalized groups. … healthy democracy and legal equality that will drive equitable economic progress. Economic progress without the prospect of social justice will feel false."

This change allows us to consider the post-Islamist thesis with an optimistic tone. Through Anies, the political style of Islamist populism appears to be evolving into a more democratic form. Anies presents himself as a democratic Muslim. Nevertheless, the post-Islamism thesis has faced significant criticism, particularly because Islamist figures, parties, and social and political movements have rarely advocated for substantive democratization. In this context, post-Islamism often seems more like a political expression that embraces democracy while engaging in Machiavellian political pragmatism that may disregard religious morality. In essence, it can employ various means, including instrumentalizing religion, to attain and maintain the status quo.

However, political reality unfolds dynamically. It is this dynamism that offers an opportunity for the development of a vibrant democracy, as argued by Dan Slater (2023). His thesis is, of course, far more optimistic than Thomas P. Power's (2018) diagnosis and similar views, emphasizing that Islamist populism and state authoritarianism can lead to a regression of democracy in the country. We shall see—will Anies emerge victorious? And if he does and has to lead all ethnic groups, will he continue to present himself as a Pancasilaist or will he adopt a more populist approach, catering primarily to the majority?

The extent of these political shifts remains uncertain. Will it be as Kartini (2014) suggested, "Habis gelap terbitlah terang

(Out of darkness comes light),” or will the darkness, as Power (2018) and his associates fear, usher in a continued regression of democracy? Nevertheless, Anies (2023) expressed in his article that “State administrators need to be humble, avoiding monopolization of the truth, and instead, providing comfortable spaces for citizens to come together and participate.” If he assumes the role of a state administrator, will he monopolize the truth as he did when aligning with Rizieq Shihab, the FPI, and other Islamist populist figures against Ahok? The future trajectory of Indonesian politics will provide answers to these questions.

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