

Article

Use of Informal Sharia Law for Civilizational Populist Mobilization in the 2024 Indonesian Elections

By Hasnan Bachtiar, Kainat Shakil & Chloe Smith

Abstract

The Defenders Front of Islam or the Front Pembela Islam (FPI) is an Islamist civilizational populist movement in Indonesia. Its religious and political blueprints have been a challenge to the elites in power. In 2017 and 2019, it was involved in the contest of electoral politics to fight against the elites by implementing the populist politics that tends to undermine the democratic process. As a result, it was banned in 2020 but re-established a year later. In 2024 elections, it supports for Anies Baswedan-Muhaimin Iskandar to compete against Prabowo Subianto-Gibran Rakabuming and Ganjar Pranowo-Mahfud MD. The findings suggest that by applying the Islamist civilizational populism, the FPI instrumentalizes the informal religious law to support its political mobilization. It emphasizes the legal-centric perspective of “sharia,” which gives the FPI’s activists and its wider audience only one imperative option to solve the problem: join in the populism. We arguably state that the informal religious law can contribute to the process of Islamist civilizational populist mobilization.

Keywords: *Islamist civilizational populism, the 2024 Indonesian elections, the Front Pembela Islam (FPI), informal religious law, Sharia, Islamism, populism, populist mobilization*

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Introduction

The Defenders Front of Islam or the Front Pembela Islam (FPI) is an Islamist civilizational populist movement in Indonesia (Barton et al., 2021; Yilmaz et al., 2022). It was born on August 17, 1998, in Jakarta when the country was undergoing political reform and transition from authoritarian to democracy. The FPI emerged as an Islamist movement that upholds the mission of fighting against immorality such as thuggery, prostitution, alcohols, drugs, gambling, and other street evils, while other Muslim organizations did not spread the Islamic messages in this level (Facal, 2020). In addition, when immorality tended to increase crime during the Reformasi, the police were seen as unable to solve the social problem (Jahroni, 2004: 222-227). To carry out its religious mission, the FPI has frequently implemented violent and vigilante methods to ensure the safety of society.

The FPI wants to Islamize state and society. It desires Indonesia to be a modern state based on the Islamic sharia. It's ideal, similar to that of the Islamist party Masyumi (1943-1960), is to install the Islamist phrases in the first principles of the state, Pancasila. The FPI wants to transform the principle of "Belief in one Almighty God" (Ketuhanan Yang Maha Esa) to become "Belief in one Almighty God with the obligation to carry out the sharia Islam for its adherents." In 2002, the FPI attempted to transform (Islamize) constitution, but failed (Wilson, 2015). However, it has maintained its ideal persistently by implementing the Islamization of society. In 2012, its top leader, Muhammad Rizieq Shihab published his book "Wawasan Kebangsaan Menuju NKRI Bersyariah" (The National State of Mind towards the Shariatized NKRI/Indonesia). This book presents the FPI's thoughts on Islamist politics, suggesting that the Islamist struggle is crucial to establishing a religious society. Accordingly, some scholars identify the FPI as the Islamist populist movement (Hadiz, 2016; Hadiz and Robison, 2017; Hadiz, 2018; Mietzner, 2018; Mietzner & Muhtadi, 2018; Aspinall & Mietzner, 2019; Mietzner, 2020).

The FPI's Islamist da'wa blueprints have been a challenge to the government. In 2016, the FPI was involved in the cross-class alliances of the populist rally that brought together more than five hundred thousand masses to oust Ahok (a Hakka name for Basuki Tjahaya Purnama) a Chinese-Christian governor of Jakarta. At the time, Rizieq was hailed by the populists as their "Grand Imam" (Imam Besar), leading the pure people in their fight against the corrupt elites. As a result, the FPI's chosen leader, Anies Baswedan had won the chairmanship of the capital in the 2017 gubernatorial election (Bachtiar, 2023a). With Ahok having the backing of President Jokowi, the FPI was also forging a message that the central government is the next target to be overthrown. In the 2019 election, the FPI endorsed Jokowi's rival, a retired Indonesia special forces general, Prabowo.

The government banned the FPI in 2020 because of the issue of its relationship with the Islamist extremist groups and its radical campaign to Islamize the republic (Yilmaz et al., 2022; Yilmaz, 2023). In addition, its leader, Rizieq was imprisoned for violating the health quarantine during the Covid-19 pandemic, although he was released on parole in

July 2022. Since then, the police have continued to prohibit the FPI's political actions both in the public sphere and the cyber space. In January 2021, however, the neo-FPI was reborn, changing its name to the Front of Islamic Brotherhood or Front Persaudaraan Islam (FPI) (Tsauro & Taufiq, 2023; Taufiq & Tsauro, 2024). In this new form, Rizieq handed over leadership to his son-in-law, a young and charismatic Muslim preacher, Muhammad Husein al-Attas. In the 2024 Indonesian elections, the FPI backed Anies to run as one of the presidential candidates. Even after its dissolution, the FPI still can play a crucial role in the country's electoral politics.

This paper aims to analyze the role of the FPI in the context of the 2024 elections in Indonesia. We argue that by implementing the Islamist civilizational populism, the FPI is instrumentalizing the informal religious law to support its populist political mobilization. It emphasizes the legal-centric perspective of sharia, which gives the FPI's supporters and the public only one imperative option to solve the problem: join in the populism. It is in line with the populist promise that populism is the only solution to the crises. The subsequent section discusses the theory of Islamist civilizational populism and informal religious law. It is followed by the context of the 2024 elections in Indonesia, the FPI's Islamist civilizational populism, and the FPI's instrumentalization of the informal religious law in its Islamist civilizational populist mobilization.

Islamist Civilizational Populism and Informal Religious Law

Populism, theoretically, is non-monolithic. There are many definitions of it. In this paper, however, we use the minimal definition of populism that is developed further by Yilmaz and Morieson (2023) which includes not only the vertical element of populism but also its horizontal element so-called civilizationism as a thicker ideology that contributes to the populist identification of 'self' and 'the other.' They define civilizational populism as a set of ideas that collectively hold that politics must serve the people's general will, and that "society is ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite,' who collaborate with the 'dangerous others' belonging to other civilizations and who pose a clear and present danger to the civilization and way of life of the pure people" (Yilmaz and Morieson, 2023: 4).

In civilizational populism, the role of religion is crucial. It is because civilizationism highly frequently includes religious aspects such as particularly informal religious law (Yilmaz, 2022). It is the law that the religious society has implemented in an informal way beyond the legal system of the state. Accordingly, we define this informal religious law "as a legal entity outside the formal legal system of a state, and the people of that state uphold and respect this law as it governs all aspects of their lives." In the context of Muslim society, this informal religious law can be sharia and the other legal entities derived from it such as fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence) and fatwa (Islamic legal opinion), as the sharia is considered the most significant source of guidance for the lives of Muslims (Yilmaz, 2022: 20). Sharia also contributes significantly to shaping the legal centric perspective among Muslims (Said, 1994).

The Context of the 2024 Elections in Indonesia

There are three pairs of presidential and vice-presidential candidates for the 2024 elections in Indonesia. The first is Anies Baswedan-Muhaimin Iskandar (AMIN), while the second and the third are Prabowo Subianto-Gibran Rakabuming Raka and Ganjar Pranowo-Mahfud MD respectively.

In the 2019 elections, the FPI supported Prabowo Subianto-Sandiaga Uno to compete against Jokowi-Ma'ruf Amin. At that time, Prabowo-Sandi was defeated. However, after the FPI experienced political difficulties – the dissolution of the organization, the imprisonment of its leader, the death of its six *laskars* – Prabowo accepted the Jokowi's offer to join his cabinets. Prabowo was appointed Defense Minister. This led the FPI to perceive Prabowo as betraying the *ummah* including in the context of the 2024 elections.

Prabowo's running mate, Gibran, is the son of Jokowi. Ganjar Pranowo, a member of the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP), backed Jokowi in both the 2014 and 2019 elections. Mahfud MD, Jokowi's Coordinating Minister for Politics, Legal, and Security Affairs, has aligned with Ganjar's candidacy. Despite their prior support for Jokowi's administration, Ganjar and Mahfud oppose the Prabowo-Gibran ticket because they perceive Jokowi's endorsement of his son's candidacy as a bid to extend his political influence (Bachtiar, 2023b).

The FPI's support for AMIN is strengthened by the political frauds allegedly committed by the Prabowo-Gibran camp, especially through Jokowi's political power. These include the perpetuation of Jokowi's political dynasty, legal manipulation by the Constitutional Court, abuse of authority and power as a state official, and vote counting fraud (Yilmaz et al., 2024a; Yilmaz et al., 2024b; Slater, 2024).

The FPI's Islamist Civilizational Populism

The FPI is an Islamist civilizational populist movement that is considered still influential in shaping the political dynamics of the Indonesia's 2024 election. This movement plays a crucial role in supporting one of the pairs of the presidential and vice-presidential candidates, Anies Baswedan and Muhaimin Iskandar (AMIN), who are competing with Ganjar Pranowo and Mahfud MD, and mainly Prabowo Subianto and Gibran Rakabuming Raka.

Although all the candidates tend to build their image as pro-diversity nationalists, the FPI helps promote AMIN as the pious leaders of the *ummah*. The FPI's image-building of AMIN purposes at retaining the Islamist voters and attracting the public attention, as most of the country's population is Muslim.

By supporting AMIN, the FPI produces Islamist civilizational populist narratives and rhetoric that guarantee its populist identification of "the self" and "the other" to distinguish those who are on the side of the *ummah* from those who are not. Accordingly, the FPI defines certain boundaries between those who can be identified as Islamist civilizational populists and those who are their adversaries.

The FPI perceives that AMIN's opponents are its populist enemies. They are the other

electoral candidates that have been supported by “corrupt elites.” The FPI directs its identification towards Ganjar-Mahfud, Prabowo-Gibran, and their backers. Ganjar-Mahfud has been proposed by the winning political party in the last election, the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP), which is also a political force that recommended the banning of the FPI. Meanwhile, Prabowo-Gibran has been supported by incumbent president Jokowi, who backed Ahok, the FPI’s most hated political figure in the 2017 gubernatorial election (Yilmaz et al., 2024a; Yilmaz et al., 2024b).

The two enemies of the FPI, the PDIP politicians and Jokowi, had been working together in the context of the 2019 elections. The FPI perceives them as the corrupt elites who have invited foreign powers such as the West and China to participate in the exploitation of the country’s natural resources (Yilmaz et al., 2022). Those powers, as the FPI claimed, are categorized as the dangerous others.

The FPI’s view of the corrupt elites and its civilizational enemies is reflected in a statement by one of its leaders, Munarman: *“Currently, we are witnessing that those who are in power; are those who are anti-Islam, anti-Islamic teachings, anti-Muslims, and even accuse the teachings of Islam of being a lie. In terms of global geopolitics, we should not hope for anyone, because it is precisely the power of the White Wolf (the West) that has been a place of dependence for compradors, foreign accomplices. Indonesia has been in contact with the White Wolf. Now the compradors are also accomplices of the Red Dragon (China)”* (Munarman, 2016).

Since then, as well as in the context of the 2024 elections, according to the FPI, the elites have involved the Muslim ummah’s civilizational enemies (the dangerous others) in the social, cultural, political, and economic destructiveness, primarily in a way of undermining the ummah’s general will. The FPI claims that because of the civilizational threats of foreign forces, the ummah have remained marginalized with no access to economic resources or social welfare.

FPI’s Instrumentalization of the Informal Religious Law in Its Islamist Civilizational Populist Mobilization

In its mission to combat perceived threats against the ummah, the FPI actively urges its activists and the public to participate in its populist agenda. The FPI frames this mission as a religious obligation, asserting that it is incumbent (wajib) upon Muslims to engage in it. We contend that the FPI strategically utilizes informal religious laws such as sharia, fiqh, and fatwa to ensure the success of its Islamist populist mobilization efforts.

The FPI employs informal religious law through three primary methods: Firstly, it implements a legal-centric perspective in applying its Islamist doctrine of “commanding good and forbidding evil” (amar ma’ruf nahi munkar), particularly in its populist political struggle. Additionally, the FPI mobilizes the masses by advocating adherence to Sharia principles in electing leaders, often based on outcomes from deliberative consultations (musyawarah) among Ijtima’ Ulama. Lastly, the FPI rallies its supporters and the public to combat alleged political fraud perpetrated by its adversaries.

First, the FPI perceives politics as the arena for its religious struggle in which this Islamist civilizational populist movement must implement its Islamist doctrine of *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar*. This doctrine urges Muslims to command good and at the same time to forbid evil. It is rooted in the Islamic scripture, Surah Ali Imran verse 104, “*And let there be among you a group of people who call to virtue, commanding the good and forbidding the evil; they are the fortunate ones.*” Other verses such as Ali Imran 110 and 114, Al-Araf 157, Al-Taubah 71, Al-Haj 41, and Al-Luqman 17 substantively also emphasize this doctrine. According to the FPI’s top leader, Rizieq Shihab, the level of obligation to implement *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar* is *fardu ‘ain* (individual obligation) for those in authority, and *fardu kifayah* (communal obligation) for those who are not (Shihab, 2024). When the authority undermines his or her obligation, however, it becomes the duty of everyone in the Muslim community, including the FPI, to conduct the *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar*. Therefore, in order to implement it, it is imperative to emphasize the fight against the populist enemies in the context of the electoral politics.

Second, the FPI trusts the informal religious institution that enables “Islamist” scholars (ulama) from across the country to engage in the collective Islamic legal reasoning (ijtihad) to find a solution to the political problem and select the best leaders from among the available candidates. On November 18, 2023, in the Adz Dzikro Mosque, Sentul, Bogor, West Java, the Ijtima’ Ulama concluded their ijtihad and decided that AMIN was the candidate to vote for (Faktakini, 2023). Rizieq Shihab claims that the result of the Ijtima’ Ulama is based on the Islamic practice of deliberative consultation (*musyawarah*) which is commanded by God. At length, he expresses his thought that:

“In matters of struggle, including social and political matters, we have upheld musyawarah. First of all, musyawarah is a command from Allah in the Qur'an. Allah says, ‘wa shawirhum fi al-amri,’ inviting them to deliberate on important matters, especially for the benefit of many people. In another verse, Allah subhanahu wa ta'ala makes deliberation the identity of the believers. Allah says, ‘wa amruhum shura’ bainahum,’ meaning that the affairs of the believers are discussed among themselves. ...So, decisions made by musyawarah, that’s the advantage, Insha Allah, will be much better than personal decisions because many opinions are taken into account. And that’s not all. Decisions made through musyawarah become a shared responsibility. So, even if there are mistakes or shortcomings in the future, we won’t point fingers (not blame anyone). But if it’s a personal decision, it can be pointed at (personally blamed). That’s the advantage of reflection. And musyawarah is because of Allah’s command, if we carry it out, it will be blessed. Well, a blessed decision, God willing, is not wrong. That is why many people have asked me, what is our attitude towards the 2024 presidential elections? I have answered that I am waiting for the decision of the Ijtima’ Ulama,” (Shihab 2023).

Based on this FPI’s informal religious law, one of its leaders, Hanif Alatas had mobilized the FPI supporters and the public in various religious assemblies across the country. He strongly promoted the Ijtima’ Ulama’s decision to vote for AMIN. He stated that: “*Are you ready to follow the command of the ulama? Are you ready to follow the ulama who are highly consistent (istiqamah)? Are you ready to follow the direction of the Ijtima’ Ulama? We obey the Ijtima’ Ulama! 2024, Anies becomes the president. Takbir!!!*” (Alatas, 2024). Ultimately, the FPI organized the massive religious gathering

(*Istighotsah Kubro*) at Benyamin Suaeb Stadium, Kemayoran, Central Jakarta on February 8, 2024, to mobilize Islamist masses to vote for AMIN.

Third, by using the informal religious law, the FPI mobilizes its supporters and the public to fight against its enemies that who are allegedly involved in political fraud. Rizieq Shihab calls on the masses to fight the political fraud that is taking place, while at the same time building mass confidence that the pure ummah can win against Ahok in the 2017 gubernatorial election, despite not being supported by a large political force. According to Rizieq Shihab, the FPI's resistance to political fraud and confidence in implementing amar ma'ruf nahi munkar is part of an effort to uphold the sharia. He said:

"Well, because of that, if you want AMIN (Anies-Muhaimin) to win, that's why I invite you, let's fight fraud. ...Don't be afraid if there are other candidates supported by economic power, political power... We have experience in Jakarta. In Jakarta, when we fought Ahok, what did we have? ...Ahok was supported by the President, supported by the Chief of Police, supported by the TNI Commander, supported by all mainstream TV media, supported by major parties, supported by Taipan conglomerates, supported by the Nine Dragons, supported by survey institutions, brothers. ... Those who supported Anis at that time were only parties, brother, whose votes were actually not as big as the parties that supported Ahok. Ahok was backed by foreign powers, brother. On paper, Ahok won. But what happened after that? It turned out that God's will was different. ...Allah Subhanahu wa taala still forced Ahok to resign. The Muslims won, brother. Right? Takbir!!! If we obey Allah, we don't have to worry. 'Intansurullah, yansurkum.' If you defend Allah, uphold His law, uphold His sharia, 'yansurkum,' surely Allah will win you all this. Allah's promise is sure to be true, Allah's promise is impossible to miss, ya Ikhwan!" (Shihab, 2024b).

The FPI accused the Prabowo-Gibran political carriage of fraud because they are backed by Jokowi who has committed abuses of power as a state official. Gibran, Jokowi's son, does not actually meet the requirements of the election law to run for vice-president, mainly because he is under 40. As a result, the Prabowo-Gibran political force filed a judicial review with the Constitutional Court to change the age for vice-presidential candidacy. They managed to change this requirement, especially as the Chief Justice of the Constitutional Court is Anwar Usman, Jokowi's brother-in-law. Their success is suspected to have been due to a collusive and nepotistic practice that manipulated the country's highest judicial system. In addition, according to the FPI, Jokowi used his social, political, and economic resources to support his son. Jokowi ordered his ministers, police and military chiefs and other officials to mobilize the masses to ensure they voted for Prabowo-Gibran. In addition, they (state officials) were also mobilized to distribute social aid to society, which certainly contained certain political messages in favor of Prabowo-Gibran's victory.

Conclusion

Despite its disbandment in 2020, the FPI underwent a resurgence as a similar Islamist civilizational populist movement in early 2021, emerging as a significant extra-parliamentary force in Indonesia's 2024 elections. Endorsing Anies

Baswedan-Muhaimin Iskandar (AMIN) as the presidential and vice-presidential candidates against Prabowo Subianto-Gibran Rakabumin and Ganjar Pranowo-Mahfud MD, the FPI positioned itself prominently. Its support for AMIN stems from its perception of the other candidates and their supporters as populist political adversaries. Specifically, the FPI identifies the Prabowo-Gibran political alliance, endorsed by Jokowi, as representing corrupt elites who allegedly align with dangerous external influences, particularly Western powers and China, posing a threat to the ummah's civilization.

We contend that in mobilizing its supporters during the 2024 elections, the FPI utilized informal religious law, encompassing sharia, fiqh, and fatwa. The FPI employed this legal framework in three keyways: Firstly, it adopted a law-centric approach in applying the principle of *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar*, particularly within its political activism. Secondly, the FPI mobilized the masses by advocating adherence to Sharia principles in selecting leaders, often guided by deliberative consultations (*musyawarah*) among Ulama during *Ijtima'* gatherings. Thirdly, the FPI rallied its supporters and the public to combat alleged political fraud perpetrated by its adversaries.

We also arguably state that the FPI uses informal religious law as an ideological expression that helps its populist mobilization. This has to do with the legalistic nature of sharia law, which has nuances of *halal* (permissible) and *haram* (forbidden) or black and white. Furthermore, according to the FPI's sharia-centric perspective, politics tends to be positioned as a field of *da'wah* (religious proselytization). Thus, for the FPI, politics must have a religious mission. If there is a concept of Islamic politics, then in this context it is sharia-based populist politics.

So far, in the case of the FPI in Indonesia, we have seen this as part and parcel of Islamist civilizational populism. However, is this also the case for other civilizational populist movements elsewhere in the world?

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