
FEAR AND LOATHING: UNCIVIL ISLAMISM AND INDONESIA'S ANTI-AHOK MOVEMENT

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The protests against Jakarta's former governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok) in late 2016 and early 2017 for allegedly having blasphemed against Islam have renewed interest in political Islam in Indonesia. What began as a seemingly innocuous movement led by fringe Islamist groups calling for legal action against Ahok quickly gained significant traction among mainstream Indonesian Muslims. The size and ferocity of the ensuing demonstration in central Jakarta on November 4, 2016 (called Aksi 411, or 411 Action), caught the Indonesian government and its security apparatus off guard, with an estimated 50,000 to 200,000 people taking to the streets. This was followed by a second, even larger demonstration on December 2, 2016 (Aksi 212, 212 Action), which took place not only in Jakarta but also in other cities across the country. These mass movements triggered a groundswell of anti-Ahok sentiment in Indonesia that drew inspiration from puritanical Islamism, and contributed to Ahok's electoral defeat in April 2017 in his bid for a second term as Jakarta's governor. He was subsequently sentenced to a two-year jail term after being found guilty of blasphemy. In this paper we look at that period of anti-Ahok protests. Our concern is

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with making sense of the strategies that groups used to spread anti-Ahok sentiment, as well as the protests' lasting consequences on majority-minority relations in Indonesia (i.e., Muslim-Christian, *Pribumi*-Chinese).

The anti-Ahok movement primarily comprised the following far-right Islamist groups: Front Pambela Islam (FPI, Islamic Defenders Front), Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI, Party of Liberation), Gerakan Nasional Pengawal Fatwa–Majelis Ulama Indonesia (GNPF-MUI, National Movement for Guiding the Fatwa of Majelis Ulama Indonesia), and Forum Umat Islam (FUI, Islamic Community Forum). We contend that these groups relied on strategies of symbolic violence that were characteristically anti-Chinese and anti-Christian in order to gain mass support against Ahok. The forms of symbolic violence used operate through the “otherization” of Indonesian Chinese and Indonesian Christians.

In this article we discuss three themes: (1) Ahok's ethnic identification was used to conflate Indonesian Chinese with China, communist ungodliness, and, thus, a quasi-demonic threat to Islam; (2) Ahok's rise to the governorship was framed as a symbol of the perceived ascendance of Indonesian Chinese to positions of political power, a process deemed to be occurring to the detriment of Muslims; and (3) protestors' claims that Ahok was leading the charge of a Christian takeover of Indonesia by co-opting *abangan* (syncretic) Muslims into his ranks, such as President Joko Widodo (Jokowi).¹ Through its use of symbolic violence, the anti-Ahok movement sought ideologically to assault Indonesian minorities and their sense of legitimacy and selfhood. To fully understand this, it is useful to situate the anti-Ahok strategies at the intersection of three ideas. First, we discuss and reverse-engineer the logic of civil Islam, as put forth by Robert Hefner,² in order to define the notion of “uncivility.” This section is crucial for setting the overarching tone of our argument, because uncivility is the defining characteristic of the Islamist groups in the anti-Ahok movement. This is made apparent in the paper's empirical section.

Second, we link uncivility with majoritarian insecurity and the way in which the politics of fear is used to mobilize majorities against minorities. Muslims are Indonesia's majority group, and the Islamist groups claim to speak on their behalf. Next, we discuss how and why uncivil groups use symbolic violence in their quest to ideologically attack minorities—for instance, to manage the insecurities they, as majorities, perceive themselves to be afflicted by.

For this paper we relied on both secondary and primary research components. For the secondary components, we analyzed newspaper reports covering the rallies, as well as data gathered from academic studies directly or indirectly related to Islam in Indonesia. Our primary data was collected through interviews and participatory observation. Our interviews were with key figures associated with the anti-Ahok campaign, including Muhammad Al-Khathath (FUI's secretary-general), Sabri Lubis (FPI's leader³), Habib Rizieq Shihab (FPI's spiritual leader) and Bachtiar Nasir (GNPF-MUI's leader). Beyond interviews, one of us attended the press conferences

¹ As shall be discussed later, far-right Islamist groups perceive Jokowi to be an *abangan* Muslim.

² Robert W. Hefner, *Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

³ Sabri Lubis is FPI's *ketua umum*, for which the closest translation is “leader.”

held before the first rally in November 2016 and observed that rally as it was taking place. We conclude this paper with a summary and the possible implications for Indonesia's religio-political landscape.

Democratic Regression: An Incomplete Thesis

To underscore the relevance of our conceptual framework, we will first provide and assess critically a brief overview of another well-established analytical approach to populism in Indonesia—democratic regression. Scholars have argued that the potential for democratic regression in Indonesian domestic politics began to emerge at the tail end of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's presidency.⁴ The burgeoning "political and economic crises" in Yudhoyono's second term were fundamentally a function of his administration's ineptitude in combating corruption, cronyism, inequality, and poverty.⁵ Signals of democratic regression became particularly clear in the lead up to the 2014 presidential election.⁶ Thus, the contest featured two populists with markedly different ideological orientations: (1) Jokowi's "technocratic, intra-systemic populism," which promised to interrogate Indonesia's political institutions and subject them to a regime of accountability; versus (2) Prabowo Subianto's "ultra-nationalist, confrontational populism," which threatened to dismantle democratic consolidation in those political institutions in favor of strongman leadership reminiscent of Suharto's rule.⁷ Indeed, Prabowo's election campaign relied on a concoction of xenophobia, sectarianism, and far-right Islamist extremism to amass support for himself and vilify the Jokowi camp.⁸ Importantly, this enlarged the legitimate spaces of religio-political participation for Islamist parties, as well as "radical Muslim militias such as the FPI," to propagate polarizing discourses under the guise of campaigning on Prabowo's behest.⁹ Jokowi has since consolidated a two-thirds majority in the Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat (DPR, House of Representatives). However, this has forced the anti-Jokowi camp to co-opt far-right Islamist groups and use "extra-parliamentary" strategies of mass mobilization to resist his presidency¹⁰—a process that achieved a "preliminary climax" with the anti-Ahok rallies.¹¹

These scholars have used the notion of democratic regression to offer a thorough evaluation of the social, political, and economic conditions that precipitated the emergence of populist leaders, such as Jokowi and Prabowo, following the end of

⁴ Marcus Mietzner, *Reinventing Asian Populism: Jokowi's Rise, Democracy, and Political Contestation in Indonesia* (Honolulu: East-West Center, 2015), 17.

⁵ Marcus Mietzner, "Indonesia's 2014 Elections: How Jokowi Won and Democracy Survived," *Journal of Democracy* 25, 4 (2014): 112–13.

⁶ Edward Aspinall and Marcus Mietzner, "Indonesian Politics in 2014: Democracy's Close Call," *Bulletin of Indonesian Economic Studies* 50, 3 (2014): 347–69.

⁷ Mietzner, *Reinventing Asian Populism*, xii.

⁸ Eve Warburton and Edward Aspinall, "Indonesian Democracy: From Stagnation to Regression," *The Strategist*, August 17, 2017, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/indonesian-democracy-stagnation-regression/>

⁹ Marcus Mietzner, "Indonesia in 2014: Jokowi and the Repolarization of Post-Soeharto Politics," in *Southeast Asian Affairs 2015*, ed. Daljit Singh (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2015), 124.

¹⁰ Marcus Mietzner, "Indonesia in 2016: Jokowi's Presidency between Elite Consolidation and Extra-Parliamentary Opposition," *Asian Survey* 57, 1 (2017): 166.

¹¹ Marcus Mietzner, "Fighting Illiberalism with Illiberalism: Islamist Populism and Democratic Deconsolidation in Indonesia," *Pacific Affairs* 91, 2 (2018): 267.

Yudhoyono's presidency, as well as that of the far-right Islamist movement against Ahok. Indeed, scholars' detailed analyses of the role of money politics, intra-party factionalism, the execution of election campaigns, the shortcomings of the Yudhoyono presidency, and biographical histories of the two 2014 candidates skillfully contextualize the political environment within which Jokowi, Prabowo, and the anti-Ahok movement came into prominence.¹² However, this approach does not explain how and why specific political discourses are able to resonate with people and gain popular traction. Neither does it explain how and why particular chains of equivalences are constructed to enable the preponderance of a particular discourse. Given the analytical priorities of democratic regression, this is unsurprising. Democratic regression is concerned with assembling an account of events to explain political outcomes—not to explain how and why specific discourses can “thrive and prosper” in particular contexts,¹³ and why those discourses become instrumental to enabling those very outcomes in the first place.¹⁴ Indeed, scholars of political ideology have long argued that describing the empirics of a particular group—be it in terms of membership size, financing, political machinations, or methods of mobilization—is analytically insufficient to explain its propulsion into the mainstream of political discourse.¹⁵ Beyond describing the factual presence of far-right Islamist groups, democratic regression cannot explain how and why a far-right Islamist discourse in particular came to dominate popular discourse. It cannot explain the rhetorical strategies used to dominate political discourse, or the conditions of possibility that these rhetorical strategies draw upon, reflect, and reproduce in order to become ideologically dominant. In other words, democratic regression cannot explain why a far-right Islamist discourse *in particular* became the ideological machine gun in the anti-Ahok movement, and why narratives claiming Islam to be under siege managed to enter the discursive mainstream. To understand this, it is necessary to undertake additional conceptual steps—starting with the notion of uncivility, connecting it to majoritarian insecurities, and culminating with symbolic violence.

Seeing Uncivility through Civility

Hefner argues that in post-Suharto Indonesia, democratic spaces have been largely dominated by Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, two civil society groups that (1) are Islamic in their orientation, and (2) operate on and promote democratic norms, values, and beliefs.¹⁶ Defining these groups as civil Islamic, Hefner argues that NU and Muhammadiyah can be described as proponents of tolerance, mutual respect, and plurality of thought. Civil Islamic groups treat the need for well-rounded education as paramount to a person's life, and participate in peaceful dialogue with Muslim and

¹² Mietzner, *Reinventing Asian Populism*.

¹³ Farish A. Noor, *The Malaysian Islamic Party PAS 1951–2013: Islamism in a Mottled Nation* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014), 116.

¹⁴ Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 2001).

¹⁵ Salman Sayyid, *A Fundamental Fear: Eurocentrism and the Emergence of Islamism* (London: Zed Books, 1997).

¹⁶ Hefner, *Civil Islam*.

non-Muslim religious groups.¹⁷ In other words, the very notion of civility in civil Islam is premised on the defense of the aforementioned values and beliefs. Islam becomes what Ann Swidler has referred to as a “cultural toolkit,” or the set of socially learnt cues, practices, and ideas people in these groups draw upon and use to uphold civility.¹⁸ Building upon this, if civility refers to values of tolerance, mutual respect, peaceful dialogue, and plurality of thought, then uncivility necessarily refers to actors, groups, and forces that adopt practices that stand in opposition to civility, thus violating those principles. Consequently, uncivil groups exploit their status as members of majority groups to manufacture fear and hatred of, rather than tolerance and mutual respect for, minorities; and, after having done so, use various strategies to physically or, as this paper discusses, symbolically assault them.

Manufacturing Fear of Minorities

In his seminal essay, “*Fear of Small Numbers*,” Arjun Appadurai connects feelings of fear, anxiety, or distrust that majorities may harbor towards minority groups with multifold political projects that rely on the construction of minorities as dialectically related to majorities, before subjecting minorities to various forms of otherization.¹⁹ Two principles define these projects. First is the imagination of an idealized majority identity with tightly bounded parameters (i.e., norms, values, beliefs, attributes, characteristics) of group membership that exclude minorities because they are deemed to possess cultural and biological traits diametrically opposed to the idealized majority.²⁰ Depending on the objectives of the majority-making project, the majority identity is envisioned as racially/ethnically, religiously, sexually—or perhaps a combination of all three—pure, superior, and, thus, more desirable than its minority counterparts.²¹ For instance, in Medieval Europe, the position of Christianity as the *only* path to salvation was achieved through characterizing Islam as heretical, and contrasting Islamic beliefs against Christianity.²² In other words, the maintenance of a majority identity needs minorities, and their alleged inferiority, *to be made* to exist.

Emerging directly from this, the second principle ambitiously superimposes the majority identity onto the nation and attempts to construct a homogeneous national identity that overwhelmingly privileges those who belong to the majority.²³ The nation thus becomes politically imagined as an ethno-nation. Since the majority group is equated with idealized purity, minorities are viciously viewed as “contagions” that

¹⁷ Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman, “Towards a Middle Way Islam in Southeast Asia: Contributions of the Gülen Movement,” *Studia Islamika* 15, 3 (2008): 445–66.

¹⁸ Ann Swidler, “Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies,” *American Sociological Review* 51, 2 (1986): 273–86.

¹⁹ Arjun Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay on the Geography of Anger* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

²⁰ David Theo Goldberg, *The Threat of Race: Reflections on Racial Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

²¹ David Waterman, “Power Politics, Hobbesian Fear, and the Duty of Self-preservation: Tariq Ali’s *Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree*,” *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 52, 2 (2016): 153–64.

²² Khaldoun Samman, “Islamophobia and the Time and Space of the Muslim Other,” *Islamophobia Studies Journal* 1, 1 (2012): 107–30.

²³ Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers*.

compromise the sacrosanctity of “an otherwise undefiled, imaginary space of homogeneity.”²⁴ Using the term “incompleteness” to refer to how the ethno-nation is deemed to be tarnished by specks of minorities, Appadurai argues that the absence of nationwide homogeneity becomes framed as problematic with tangible consequences—such as spikes in crime, loss of jobs, and rising income inequality—and thus translates into a source of insecurity.²⁵

Problems of criminality and unemployment are manifestations of the increasing structural unpredictability of late industrial capitalism.²⁶ However, they rarely get identified as such in the popular imagination because the often contradictory forces that come together to constitute the ideology of late industrial capitalism obscure and confound, rather than clarify, social, political, economic, and cultural life.²⁷ As a result, the abstractness of systemically induced insecurities are simplified, and given an observable and, crucially, *blamable* form—that is, as problems directly brought about by minority groups.²⁸ From here, insecurity is politically exploited and made to morph into people’s anxiety about and fear of minorities in order to maintain their peripheral status as the Other through an array of discursive strategies. These strategies diversify the sources of fear, and render the politics of fear self-sustaining.²⁹ In other words, not only are minorities to be feared for multiple reasons, the fear-making itself becomes decentralized and diffused away from political leaders and into the hands of laypeople. Since the objective of fear politics is to maintain the privileged status of majorities through the subjugation of minorities—or the *majoritization* of the nation into the ethno-nation—these strategies necessarily entail the *de-minoritization* of the nation.³⁰

De-minoritization through Symbolic Violence

Appadurai argues that the perceived incompleteness of the ethno-nation becomes a rallying point and justification for political actors to use physical violence against minorities.³¹ This has arguably been the impetus for pogroms against the Jews in Nazi Germany, Muslims in India, Ahmadis in Pakistan, and others. Yet, as scholars of neoliberalism and post-colonialism have demonstrated, physical violence is merely

²⁴ Kalervo N. Gulson and P. Taylor Webb, “‘We Had to Hide We’re Muslim’: Ambient Fear, Islamic Schools, and the Geographies of Race and Religion,” *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 34, 4 (2013): 635.

²⁵ Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers*, 9.

²⁶ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Social Change* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1989).

²⁷ Slavoj Žižek, “The Matrix, or, the Two Sides of Perversion,” in *The International Handbook of Virtual Learning Environments*, ed. Joel Weiss, Jason Nolan, Jeremy Hunsinger, and Peter Trifonas (The Netherlands: Springer, 2006), 1549–69.

²⁸ Gerard Delanty, “Fear of Others: Social Exclusion and the European Crisis of Solidarity,” *Social Policy & Administration* 42, 6 (2008): 676–90.

²⁹ Scott McClintock, *Topologies of Fear in Contemporary Fiction: The Anxieties of Post-nationalism and Counter Terrorism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

³⁰ Adrianna Kemp, “‘Dangerous Populations’: State Territoriality and the Constitution of National Minorities,” in *Boundaries and Belonging: States and Societies in the Struggle to Shape Identities and Local Practices*, ed. Joel S Migdal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 73–98.

³¹ Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers*.

one manifestation of violence.³² Indeed, violence against minorities often adopts symbolic dimensions. Symbolic violence can be understood as an ideological assault on an individual's sense of self.³³ Since one's sense of self is a psychological structure that contains multiple interacting identities,³⁴ symbolic violence entails an assault on the racial/ethnic, religious, gender, sexual, or any other identities that are central to a person's sense of self and, thus, sense of being.

Minorities who suffer symbolic violence at the hands of majorities tend to remain excluded from access to social, political, economic, and cultural resources. Denying minorities access to resources is, in effect, an attempt to de-minoritize spaces in which those resources can be found and used. This can occur in multiple ways. For instance, when discussing issues of terrorism in Western democracies, non-Muslims' access to the benefits of freedom of speech far supersedes that of Muslims. This perhaps explains why, in spite of issuing comprehensive condemnations repeatedly, Muslims are nevertheless assumed to be silent on and sympathetic to, and thus complicit regarding, terrorism.³⁵ Western constitutions may certainly permit Muslims to speak freely. However, their voices are often drowned out by structurally advantaged actors who use their privileged positions to speak considerably louder. The voices of Western Muslims are, in effect, silenced, which in turn entrenches the invisibility of their subjective experiences. Similarly, in countries like the United States, being Caucasian is ordained with racial privilege that generally enables White people to navigate through the social world more easily than members of a racial minority.³⁶ What is doubly brutal about this is the fact that many members of majority racial groups are so privileged as to either remain ignorant of, or to conveniently deny, the existence of any advantages accrued to them by virtue of their racial membership.³⁷ This feeds the

³² About neoliberalism, see: Henry A. Giroux, *Youth in a Suspect Society: Democracy or Disposability?* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Henry A. Giroux, "Neoliberalism's War against Higher Education and the Role of Public Intellectuals," in *The Future of University Education*, ed. Michal Izak, Monika Kostera, and Michal Zawadzki (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2017), 185–206; Goldberg, *The Threat of Race: Reflections on Racial Neoliberalism*; David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); and Naomi Klein, *No Logo, No Space, No Choice, No Jobs* (London: Flamingo, 2001). About post-colonialism, see: Hatem Bazian, "National Entry–Exit Registration System: Arabs, Muslims, and Southeast Asians and Post-9/11 'Security Measures,'" *Islamophobia Studies Journal* 2, 1 (2014): 82–98; Hatem Bazian, "Islamophobia and the Three Evils of Society," *Islamophobia Studies Journal* 3, 1 (2015): 158–66; Cora Alexa Døving, "The Way They Treat Their Daughters and Wives: Racialisation of Muslims in Norway," *Islamophobia Studies Journal* 3, 1 (2015): 62–77; Steven Fink, "Fear under Construction: Islamophobia within American Christian Zionism," *Islamophobia Studies Journal* 2, 1 (2014): 26–43; and Farid Hafez, "Disciplining the 'Muslim Subject': The Role of Security Agencies in Establishing Islamic Theology within the State's Academia," *Islamophobia Studies Journal* 2, 2 (2014): 43–57.

³³ Elliot Weininger, "Foundations of Class Analysis in the Work of Bourdieu," in *Alternative Foundations of Class Analysis*, ed. Erik Olin Wright (2002), 119–79.

³⁴ Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006).

³⁵ See: Kamran Pasha, "The Big Lie about Muslim Silence on Terrorism," *Huffington Post*, "The Blog," May 21, 2009, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/kamran-pasha/the-big-lie-about-muslim_b_188991.html; and Arwa Mahdawi, "The 712-page Google Doc that Proves Muslims Do Condemn Terrorism," *The Guardian*, March 26, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/shortcuts/2017/mar/26/muslims-condemn-terrorism-stats>

³⁶ Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

³⁷ Laura Pulido, "Rethinking Environmental Racism: White Privilege and Urban Development in Southern California," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 90, 1 (2000): 12–40.

narrative that authorities give special treatment to racial minorities because *they* are problematic.

In Malaysia, far-right actors from majority groups appear to envision their own utopias that either minimize or completely erase racial, cultural, and religious expressions of their respective Others. In their quest for an idyll, they embrace tactics of dehumanization to marginalize specific groups from public spaces. Thus, there appears to exist some Malay-Muslims in Malaysia who believe in the legitimacy of segregated Muslim-only laundrettes on the grounds that non-Muslims may be too dirty,³⁸ those who believe that only Muslims should be permitted to use the word “Allah,”³⁹ and those who campaign against non-Muslims’ consumption of alcohol.⁴⁰ The common theme connecting allegations of Muslim silence, White privilege, and Malay-Muslim ethno-religious supremacy is that minorities are defined and anchored in pejorative terms before being invoked for various forms of Otherization—be it through silencing minority voices, denying the subjective experiences of minorities, or outright labeling of minorities as inferior.

With this in mind, we will explore how far-right Islamists in Indonesia have embarked on a project of fear politics against the minority Indonesian Chinese by employing various forms of symbolic violence in an attempt to de-minoritize political spaces. The various forms of and accompanying justifications for the use of symbolic violence reveals the discursive chains of equivalences far-right Islamists rely on to construct Indonesian Chinese as people to be feared and thus ideologically assaulted. The empirical starting point for this argument is the series of anti-Ahok rallies by Islamist groups. Before commencing with that analysis, a brief overview of Islam in Indonesia, as well as a review of the anti-Ahok movement, is provided. The review of Islam provides the backdrop necessary to understand the emergence of far-right Indonesian Islamist groups. The background on the anti-Ahok rallies contextualizes the reasons this issue gained substantial traction among Islamists, and thus explains why it is a useful empirical prism to study the broader majority-minority relationship in Indonesia.

Islam in Indonesia

Islam in Indonesia has traditionally been represented through the lens of the *abangan* (traditionalists) and *santri* (modernists) divide. While the categorization of Indonesian Muslims into dichotomous groups is over simplistic, ahistorical, and does not capture the lived realities of religious practice,⁴¹ this division was crystallized through the emergence of Indonesia’s two main Muslim organizations: the Nahdlatul

³⁸ The Straits Times, “Malaysian Preacher in Launderette Controversy has Credentials Revoked by Selangor Sultan,” *The Straits Times*, October 16, 2017, <http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/malaysian-preacher-in-laundrette-controversy-has-credentials-revoked-by-selangor>

³⁹ Vijaya Lokasundari Sankar, “Malaysian Editorials on the Allah Issue: A Critical Discourse Study,” *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies* 10, 1 (2013): 31–61.

⁴⁰ Syed Jaymal Zahiid, “Canned Beer Fest Will Hurt Not Just Organisers but Malaysia, Says Industry,” *The Malay Mail*, September 23, 2017, <http://www.themalaymailonline.com/malaysia/article/canned-beer-fest-will-hurt-not-just-organisers-but-malaysia-says-industry>

⁴¹ M. C. Ricklefs, “The Birth of the *Abangan*,” *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 162, 1 (2006): 35–55.

Ulama and Muhammadiyah. Formed by Ahmad Dahlan in 1912, Muhammadiyah has conventionally drawn support from Indonesia's urban, middle and upper-middle class Muslims, who generally have been educated in Western schools and are reformist in their religious orientation.⁴² NU was established in 1926 in response to the perceived threat by reformist movements in colonial Indonesia, and has its roots in *pesantren* (traditional religious schools) led by *kiyai* (religious teachers)—chiefly in regions that form the present-day provinces of Central and East Java.⁴³ NU has traditionally drawn its support from the rural populations of Indonesia, and defines its religious identity from the key tenets of *pesantren* education: Islamic jurisprudence of one of the four Sunni schools (in particular the Shafi'i school of jurisprudence), Ash'ari theology, and the orthodox mysticism of Persian theologian Al-Ghazali.⁴⁴ Neither organization was explicitly involved in Indonesian politics in the post-New Order era, although today they are both linked to political parties—NU with the National Awakening Party (Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa, PKB) and Muhammadiyah with the National Mandate Party (Partai Amanat Nasional, PAN).

Both NU and Muhammadiyah have a significant number of followers—estimated to be about 50 million and 30 million, respectively—and thus enjoy considerable influence in Indonesia. That said, defining Islam in Indonesia solely along the lines of these two organizations would be an oversimplification. In recent decades, the distinctions between the two groups have become increasingly blurred. Carool Kersten has argued that the automatic association of Islamic traditionalism with conservative outlooks, and modernist Muslims with progressive attitudes, is no longer valid today, as new manifestations of Islam cut across this divide.⁴⁵ This has its roots in the movement for the renewal of Islamic thought in the 1980s and 1990s, embodied by the rise to prominence of Islamic leaders such as Nurcholish Madjid and Harun Nasution, who took inspiration from early twentieth-century Islamic modernism promoted by the Egyptian reformer Muhammad Abduh, but were critical of established Indonesian reformism and conservative traditionalist thought.⁴⁶ The emergence of different religio-political forms of thought enabled other actors to rise and challenge the socio-political status quo, thus eroding NU's and Muhammadiyah's grip over mainstream Islamic thought in the country. In particular, the Tarbiyah movement (influenced by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood), the Salafi movement, and Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia have made substantial inroads in Indonesian society by challenging the NU's and Muhammadiyah's control over mosques, schools, and other Islamic institutions.⁴⁷ These “alternative” movements are transnational in nature,

⁴² Ahmad Najib Burhani, “Liberal and Conservative Discourse in the Muhammadiyah,” in *Contemporary Developments in Indonesian Islam: Explaining the “Conservative Turn,”* ed. Martin van Bruinessen (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2013), 107.

⁴³ Hefner, *Civil Islam*.

⁴⁴ Gregory Fealy and Robin Bush, “The Political Decline of Traditional Ulama in Indonesia: The State, Umma, and Nahdlatul Ulama,” *Asian Journal of Social Science* 42, 5, (2014): 536–37.

⁴⁵ These include informal clusters of scholars associated with the State Islamic University (IAIN) Syarif Hidayatullah in Jakarta and IAIN Sunan Kalijaga in Yogyakarta. See Carool Kersten, *Islam in Indonesia: The Contest for Society, Ideas, and Values* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 42.

⁴⁶ Martin van Bruinessen, “Overview of Muslim Organizations, Associations, and Movements in Indonesia,” in van Bruinessen, *Contemporary Developments in Indonesian Islam*, 29.

⁴⁷ For more on HTI, see Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman, *Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia and Political Islam: Identity, Ideology, and Religio-Political Mobilisation* (London: Routledge, 2018).

which, in the case of HTI and the Salafi movement, includes the rejection of the very notion of a nation-state. This is a fundamental departure from NU and Muhammadiyah, which are organizations whose histories are inextricably linked to Indonesia's nationalism.⁴⁸ While there was a slow but consistent growth in the influence of groups like HTI, the Salafis, and Tarbiyah, the campaign against Ahok appears to suggest that their influence extends far beyond their actual membership.

The Movement against Ahok

Against the backdrop of the rise of conservative Islamic movements in the country, Ahok's allegedly blasphemous remarks against Islam became a national issue. On September 27, 2016, Ahok gave a speech to the residents of Jakarta's Thousand Islands regency during his bid for re-election. The original statement in Bahasa Indonesia, which was then edited and misconstrued, is as follows:

Ladies and gentlemen, you don't have to vote for me—because you've been lied to by those using [the Quran's] Surah al-Maidah verse 51.⁴⁹

An edited version of the video was widely circulated on social media platforms and generated controversy, with some netizens asserting that Ahok had claimed that the Quran "lied" to Muslims.⁵⁰ The issue became politicized and was capitalized on to undermine his chances for re-election. Ahok's political opponents focused on his status as a racial and religious minority and accused him of not only being insensitive, but also abrasive, towards Islam.⁵¹ Taking a tough stance against Ahok was a strategy aimed at undermining Jokowi, who was a close ally of Ahok's. Jokowi and Ahok had successfully contested the 2012 Jakarta gubernatorial election on the same ticket, and Jokowi's subsequent bid for the presidency saw Ahok succeed Jokowi as governor in 2014. Jokowi was also seen to be instrumental in ensuring that his political party, the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (Partai Demokrasi Indonesia Perjuangan, PDI-P), nominated Ahok for the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election.⁵² Taking up this issue was a way for those dissatisfied with the Jokowi administration to express their unhappiness that the National Police (Kepolisian Negara Republik Indonesia, POLRI) was seemingly delaying the official investigation into Ahok's comments, thus leading to allegations that Jokowi was "protecting" Ahok.⁵³ The timing of Ahok's controversial remarks,⁵⁴ coupled with the larger political context within which they were made,

⁴⁸ Hefner, *Civil Islam*.

⁴⁹ Yenni Kwok, "Where Memes Could Kill: Indonesia's Worsening Problem of Fake News," *Time*, January 6, 2017, <http://time.com/4620419/indonesia-fake-news-ahok-chinese-christian-islam/>

⁵⁰ Kwok, "Where Memes Could Kill."

⁵¹ Ahok is of an ethnic Chinese and Christian background.

⁵² Suara Nasional, "Satu Mobil, Upaya Jokowi Lobi Mega Agar PDIP Dukung Ahok," *Suara Nasional*, July 29, 2016, <http://suaranasional.com/2016/07/29/satu-mobil-upaya-jokowi-lobi-mega-agar-pdip-dukung-ahok/>

⁵³ Hafidz Mukti, "FPI: Pemeriksaan Terbuka, Langkah Jokowi Lindungi Ahok," *CNN Indonesia*, November 5, 2016, <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20161105213504-12-170576/fpi-pemeriksaan-terbuka-langkah-jokowi-lindungi-ahok/>

⁵⁴ It should be noted that while the video was doctored, commentators have stated that he should have known better than to even quote the Qur'an, lest it be used against him. Sakinah Ummu Haniy, "Why I'm Not Surprised by Ahok's Jail Sentence," *The Rappler*, May 9, 2017, <https://www.rappler.com/world/regions/asia-pacific/indonesia/bahasa/englishedition/169345-ahok-verdict-unsurprising>

presented the ideal platform for conservative Islamic groups looking to make a national impact.

The controversy surrounding Ahok's comments and the seemingly tardy response by the central government to take action triggered unhappiness among conservative Islamic groups over the role of Islam in post-New Order Indonesia.⁵⁵ Kersten noted that both progressive and reactionary Muslim intellectuals have been frustrated by the "resilience of Indonesia's elite and [their] ability to manipulate the political process for their own interests."⁵⁶ A number of political figures have consistently dominated the annals of power since the New Order period, often at the expense of new actors promoting a more overt religious agenda.⁵⁷ The election of Jokowi, the first Indonesian president since *reformasi* to have had no political links to the New Order, heralded a new era of Indonesian politics in which tensions between the old establishment and state actors have become more acute. Moreover, while NU's interests have been maintained and represented by Jokowi's government—particularly because NU has been affiliated with the ruling coalition through the PKB—there has been discontent from other Islamic organizations, including Muhammadiyah.

Additionally, the existence of long-standing political feuds was a key driving force behind the involvement of a number of groups in the anti-Ahok movement. The rivalry between Ahok and FPI leader Rizieq Shihab dates back to 2012, when Ahok was elected as Jakarta's vice-governor. In October 2012, the FPI organized a rally at the Jakarta City Hall to protest that Ahok, a non-Muslim, had a role in overseeing Muslim agencies that came under the purview of Jakarta's city government. In 2014 the FPI rejected the idea of Ahok's succeeding Jokowi as governor, and over the next two years criticized Governor Ahok's policy initiatives.⁵⁸ For his part, Ahok repeatedly threatened to ban the FPI in Jakarta, and prevented it from organizing religious processions (*takbir keliling*) around Jakarta during the Hari Raya Idul Fitri holiday.⁵⁹ Rizieq's involvement in anti-Ahok protests should therefore be considered within the context of his political feud with Ahok.

The 411 and 212 protests signaled the legitimacy enjoyed by their primary organizers—the FPI, HTI, GNPf-MUI, and FUI—in Indonesian society. Both demonstrations were bottom-up movements that were brought together by citizens' discontent with Ahok and the central government's management of Islam. In addition to participants from the local chapters of these groups and local residents of Jakarta, supporters from other parts of Indonesia came to Jakarta to participate in the demonstrations despite the security forces' efforts to limit their flow to the capital city. While there were allegations that some of the demonstrators who took part in the 411 protests were paid to do so, the size and ferocity of the demonstrations suggest that

⁵⁵ Moch Nur Ichwan, "Towards a Puritanical Moderate Islam: The Majelis Ulama Indonesia and the Politics of Religious Orthodoxy," in van Bruinessen, *Contemporary Developments in Indonesian Islam*, 82–83.

⁵⁶ Keersten, *Islam in Indonesia*, 279.

⁵⁷ Vedi Hadiz, *Islamic Populism in Indonesia and the Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

⁵⁸ Callistasia Anggun Wijaya, "Rizieq Lets Rip, Ahok Tight-lipped in Court Face-off," *The Jakarta Post*, March, 1 2017, <https://www.pressreader.com/indonesia/the-jakarta-post/20170301/281479276196199>

⁵⁹ Muhamad Agil Aliansyah, "Pedasnya Ahok tolak keinginan FPI takbir keliling DKI," *Merdeka.com*, July 6, 2016, <https://www.merdeka.com/jakarta/pedasnya-ahok-tolak-keinginan-fpi-takbir-keliling-dki.html>

this was an issue that resonated among many Indonesian Muslims—with the rhetoric that mass participation was needed to pressure the government to “save” Islam in Indonesia, a conviction that gained significant traction.⁶⁰ With this background in mind, next we examine the anti-Ahok movement from the lens of symbolic violence as conceptualized in the earlier sections.

Attacking the Indonesian Chinese through China

A significant trope that Islamist groups have used to mobilize members has been to characterize both Ahok and Jokowi as flirting with, and thus becoming close to, China. Such allegations stem from the fact that the Jokowi government’s focus on economic reform and development has pushed it to pursue closer economic relations with China. For instance, China has invested significantly in the Jakarta-Bandung High Speed Rail project.⁶¹ Indonesia also aims to make China its top source of tourists by 2020 by developing strategies to market the country as an attractive destination to Chinese citizens.⁶² Notably, Indonesian Finance Minister Sri Mulyani Indrawati even stated her support for China’s renminbi to become a currency of choice in international trade.⁶³ Furthermore, depending on the parameters one uses, China is Indonesia’s largest foreign investor.⁶⁴ Criticizing these ties, Muhammad Al-Khaththath, FUI’s secretary-general, described Jokowi as a pawn utilized by China for its own political objectives.⁶⁵ Additionally, China’s status as a communist country continues to cause unease among many quarters of Indonesian society. In particular, many Islamic groups regard communism with suspicion, given Indonesia’s own checkered experience with communism and the now-banned Indonesian Communist Party (Partai Komunis Indonesia, PKI). That Jokowi hails from PDI-P, a party that has occasionally been accused by its political opponents of being leftist and sympathetic to the communist cause, only served to further compound fears—rational or otherwise—that his government was compromising Indonesia’s Islamic identity. We shall revisit this point later in the paper. First, the significance of Ahok’s being Jakarta’s governor during Indonesia’s perceived alignment with China must be emphasized. Ahok’s effective execution of Jokowi’s economic reforms within Jakarta renders it possible for the Islamist groups to treat him as being at the forefront of Indonesia’s shift towards

⁶⁰ Erik Purnama Putra, “Ahok Tuding Pendemo 4/11 Kelompok Garis Keras dan Dibayar Rp 500 Ribu,” *Republika.co.id*, November 17, 2016, <http://www.republika.co.id/berita/nasional/politik/16/11/17/ogrksr334-ahok-tuding-pendemo-411-kelompok-garis-keras-dan-dibayar-rp-500-ribu>

⁶¹ Rizal Sukma, “Insight: Is Indonesia Tilting toward China?” *The Jakarta Post*, December 11, 2015, <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2015/12/11/insight-is-indonesia-tilting-toward-china.html>

⁶² See: Jeffrey Hutton, “Move over Aussies, the Chinese are Coming. And Indonesia Can’t Get Enough of Them,” *South China Morning Post*, October 8, 2017, <http://www.scmp.com/week-asia/business/article/2114177/move-over-aussies-chinese-are-coming-and-indonesia-cant-get>; and Resty Woro Yuniar, “Charter Flights, Halal Tourism: How Indonesia Is Wooing Chinese Tourists from Thailand’s Grasp,” *South China Morning Post*, September 10, 2017, <http://www.scmp.com/week-asia/business/article/2110385/charter-flights-halal-tourism-how-indonesia-woosing-chinese>

⁶³ Lin Wanxia, “Indonesia Finance Minister Eyes further Use of Yuan,” *Asia Times*, November 2, 2017, <http://www.atimes.com/article/indonesian-finance-minister-eyes-use-yuan/>

⁶⁴ Dennis Ignatius, “The East Is Red,” *New Mandala*, November 23, 2016, <http://www.newmandala.org/the-east-is-red/>

⁶⁵ Interview with Muhammad Al-Khaththath, November 2016.

cause, only served to further compound fears—rational or otherwise—that his government was compromising Indonesia’s Islamic identity. We shall revisit this point later in the paper. First, the significance of Ahok’s being Jakarta’s governor during Indonesia’s perceived alignment with China must be emphasized. Ahok’s effective execution of Jokowi’s economic reforms within Jakarta renders it possible for the Islamist groups to treat him as being at the forefront of Indonesia’s shift towards China.⁶⁶ Additionally, the spread of rumors that Indonesia was bringing in Chinese migrant workers *en masse* coincided with the upsurge of the anti-Ahok movement. Thus, Ahok became inevitably linked with allegations that Indonesia’s immigration policy had brought in 10 million workers from China at the expense of Indonesian laborers.⁶⁷ Ahok’s apparent personal affinity for China was perhaps cemented by accusations that he would fly in five hundred or so Chinese nationals to defend him during the 411 rally.⁶⁸ Insofar as these rumors were discredited, the implications they raised were clear: the anti-Ahok Islamists had the ammunition necessary to frame him as a China enthusiast, determined to sell out the country to China. If Jokowi could not escape accusations of being half-Chinese and aligned with China,⁶⁹ it was unsurprising that Ahok would be subject to a similar fate. Here, it is worth revisiting the principle reason given by Sabri Lubis for the anti-Ahok movement’s contempt for China. In an interview with one of us, he condemned China and its citizens as embodiments of Ya’juj and Ma’juj (the Bible’s Gog and Magog).⁷⁰

In Islamic theology, Ya’juj and Ma’juj have been described as vicious tribes that terrorized, laid siege upon, and destroyed innocent communities. When King Dhul-Qarnayn came across one such region that had been attacked repeatedly, the residents living there asked him to erect a wall and trap Ya’juj and Ma’juj—a request Dhul-Qarnayn duly complied with. However, he warned that in the lead up to the end of times, Ya’juj and Ma’juj would be released and return to reign with terror once again.⁷¹ Significantly, Islamic theology narrativizes the end of times as a long period of global devastation that is to be feared. It is this eschatological dimension of the tale that Sabri Lubis seems most concerned about. To him, the fact that China is associated with communism, and thus *Godlessness*, functions as the nodal point to characterize each and every practice it engages in as anti-Islamic. That the Chinese government has been persecuting the Uighur Muslims in East Turkestan (the Xinjiang province in modern day China) for decades, a point Sabri Lubis made in his condemnation of China during

⁶⁶ Eveline Danubrata and Gayatri Suroyo, “In Indonesia, Labor Friction and Politics Fan Anti-Chinese Sentiment,” *Reuters*, April 18, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-indonesia-election-china/in-indonesia-labor-friction-and-politics-fan-anti-chinese-sentiment-idUSKBN17K0YG>

⁶⁷ “Rumors there Are Already 10 Million Chinese Workers in Indonesia on the Rise, Jokowi Tells Police to Catch Hoax Spreaders,” *Coconuts*, December 23, 2016, <https://coconuts.co/jakarta/news/rumors-there-are-already-10-million-chinese-workers-indonesia-rise-jokowi-tells-police/>

⁶⁸ “Police Deny Crazy Rumors of Shoot-on-sight Orders and 500 Chinese Nationals Coming to Defend Ahok at Friday FPI Rally,” *Coconuts*, October 31, 2016, <https://coconuts.co/jakarta/news/police-deny-crazy-rumors-shoot-sight-orders-and-500-chinese-nationals-coming-defend-ahok/>

⁶⁹ Bhavan Jaipragas, “How Indonesia’s Anti-Chinese Fake News Problem Spun out of Control,” *South China Morning Post*, December 22, 2016, <http://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/2056627/how-indonesias-anti-chinese-fake-news-problem-spun-out-control>

⁷⁰ Interview with Sabri Lubis, November 2016.

⁷¹ For more on this tale, see Surah Al-Kahf, verses 83–85, of the Qur’an.

becomes rationalized through the prism of eschatology, as a sign that the day of judgment is all but upon mankind. In this context, the notion that Jokowi and Ahok seem to be cozying up to China becomes perceived as a laceration against Indonesia's Islamic identity, and is thus framed as a heinous violation of Islam.

It must, however, be pointed out that the FPI's contempt does not merely lie with China, Jokowi, and Ahok. Rather, the FPI's anti-China, anti-Jokowi, and anti-Ahok narrative must be situated within the dynamics of ethno-religious relations in Indonesia. Here, it is crucial to note that in the aftermath of independence,⁷³ during the 1965 anti-communist purge,⁷⁴ in the anti-Chinese riots after the fall of Soeharto,⁷⁵ and, more recently,⁷⁶ the Indonesian Chinese have been consistently accused of harboring loyalties to China rather than to Indonesia—to the extent that Islamists have accused Indonesian Chinese politicians and businessmen “of being China's puppets in Indonesia.”⁷⁷

Significantly, Nasir, too, underscored the association between Ahok and communism when he described his leadership style as authoritarian and thus akin to the communist regime of China.⁷⁸ However, he took it a step further by claiming Ahok to be even more dangerous than the Chinese Communist Party, precisely because he is a Christian.⁷⁹ As such, Nasir framed Ahok as pushing for both the communist and Christian agendas in Indonesia.⁸⁰ The fact that Indonesian Chinese have been perceived as potentially disloyal to Indonesia for roughly seventy years—with these anti-Chinese sentiments periodically peaking with deadly violence—indicates that mistrust towards Indonesian Chinese is entrenched in the country's ethno-religious fabric. Indeed, to Islamist groups, an Indonesian Chinese cannot be defined and understood through a lens of Indonesian-ness. At best, Indonesian Chinese are deemed to treat their affiliation to the nation of Indonesia as an afterthought, and, at worst, any emotional attachment to Indonesia is assumed to be nonexistent. With this in mind, Indonesian Chinese become proxies for China and, crucially, proximate

⁷³ See: David Mazingo, *Chinese Policy toward Indonesia: 1949–1967* (Singapore: Equinox Publishing: Singapore, 1976); and Eugene K. B. Tan, “From Sojourners to Citizens: Managing the Ethnic Chinese Minority in Indonesia and Malaysia,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 24, 6 (2001): 949–78.

⁷⁴ Jemma Purdey, “Political Change Reopening the *Asimilasi* versus *Integrasi* Debate: Ethnic Chinese Identity in Post-Suharto Indonesia,” *Asian Ethnicity* 4, 3 (2003): 421–37.

⁷⁵ See: Jemma Purdey, *Anti-Chinese Violence in Indonesia: 1996–99* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006); Filomeno V. Aguilar, “Citizenship, Inheritance, and the Indigenizing of ‘Orang Chinese’ in Indonesia,” *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 9, 3 (2001): 501–33; and Ignatius Wibowo, “Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Indonesian Chinese after the Fall of Soeharto,” *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 16, 1 (2001): 125–46.

⁷⁶ See: Charlotte Setijadi, *Ethnic Chinese in Contemporary Indonesia: Changing Identity Politics and the Paradox of Sinification* (Singapore: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, March 17, 2016), https://web5.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS_Perspective_2016_12.pdf; and Charlotte Setijadi, *Chinese Indonesians in the Eyes of the Pribumi Public Paradox of Sinification* (Singapore: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, September, 27, 2017), https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS_Perspective_2017_73.pdf

⁷⁷ Setijadi, *Ethnic Chinese in Contemporary Indonesia*, 8.

⁷⁸ Interview with Bachtiar Nasir, November 2016.

⁷⁹ Interview with Bachtiar Nasir.

⁸⁰ Interview with Bachtiar Nasir; the significance of Ahok's faith shall be revisited in the third section of the analysis.

embodiments of the *apocalyptic* anti-Islamic threat China is deemed to pose to Indonesia.

The three layers of anti-Chinese arguments can be summed up as follows. The far-right Islamists are attempting to construct discursive connections between (1) Ahok and Jokowi with China (i.e., political intimacy), (2) China with anti-Muslimness (i.e., apocalyptic prophecies), and (3) Indonesian Chinese with loyalty for China (treasonous). Thus, both Jokowi and Ahok become symbols for the orchestration of a shift within Indonesia towards China on behalf of Ahok's fellow Indonesian Chinese, in a concerted effort to steer Indonesia away from Islam. The ramifications this narrative has cannot be understated. Indeed, it sheds significant meaning on Sabri Lubis's belief that it is incumbent upon all Muslims to fight against China and Chinese interests.⁸¹ That belief provided a crucial rallying point for the Islamists to rally mass support against Ahok, and also continues to provide the conditions of possibility for Anti-Ahok sentiment to translate into sustained symbolic violence against Indonesia Chinese.

Fearing the Political Ascendancy of the Indonesian Chinese

Three significant events catalysed Islamist groups' anti-Ahok protests: Jokowi's decision to run for Jakarta's governorship in 2012 with Ahok as his running mate, Ahok's subsequent promotion from deputy to governor in 2014, and his eventual decision to seek election to the governorship in 2017. While Ahok was the explicit target of these rallies, their primary objective was to scare away Indonesian Chinese at-large from considering political office. The ethnic Chinese are already perceived to possess overwhelming control of the Indonesian economy. Before the 1998 riots, rumors abounded that, despite only constituting some 3 percent of the country's population, Indonesian Chinese controlled close to 70 percent of the Indonesian economy.⁸² The implication of this accusation was the belief that the Chinese were denying Muslims the opportunity to participate equitably in the economy.⁸³ That ethnic Chinese were gradually entering politics, too, led some Islamists to fear that the Indonesian Chinese were in the midst of orchestrating a parallel takeover of the political system. Control of both the government and economy would effectively give the Indonesian Chinese complete control of Indonesia. To Islamists, this would cement the marginalization of the Muslim majority. Since Ahok embodied the threat of a total Chinese takeover, it became pertinent for Islamist groups to launch symbolic attacks against him. This fear was perhaps accentuated by three factors: the lingering fear of a communist resurgence, the fact that Ahok was running for election in the

⁸¹ Interview with Sabri Lubis.

⁸² See: "The Happy Chinese," *The Economist*, February 2, 2006, <http://www.economist.com/node/5476216>; and Zubaidah Nazeer, "Why Chinese-Indonesians Don't have to Hide any Longer," *South China Morning Post*, September 10, 2016, <http://www.scmp.com/week-asia/business/article/2018037/why-chinese-indonesians-dont-have-hide-any-longer>

⁸³ See: Adam Schwarz, "Indonesia after Suharto," *Foreign Affairs*, July 1, 1997, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/1997-07-01/indonesia-after-suharto>;

Sidney Jones, "Indonesia's Illiberal Turn: After the Ahok Case," *Foreign Affairs*, May 26, 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/indonesia/2017-05-26/indonesias-illiberal-turn>; and Sharon Siddique and Leo Suryadinata, "Bumiputra and Pribumi: Economic Nationalism (*Indiginism*) in Malaysia and Indonesia," *Pacific Affairs* 54, 4 (1981): 662–87.

country's capital, and the notion that Jakarta's governorship was a viable launch pad for those who aspired to become president.

Until 1965, the PKI was part of a loose coalition of Indonesian nationalists, Islamists, and communists (NASAKOM), and operated under the axiom of Guided Democracy—or the belief that these ideological currents need not be treated as inherently contradictory and hostile, but as forces that could be managed and thus manipulated to work under Sukarno in relative peace.⁸⁴ Following the failure of what was perceived as an attempted coup by the PKI against Sukarno in 1965, the government, Islamist groups (such as NU and Muhammadiyah), an array of nonreligious political groups,⁸⁵ and perhaps, most notoriously, a Suharto-led military, massacred an estimated half million Indonesians alleged to be either communists or communist sympathisers.⁸⁶ While some Chinese were targeted in the pogroms, the massacre has been inaccurately mythologized as an anti-Chinese one.⁸⁷

At the same time as the Indonesian anti-communist violence, the governments of neighboring Malaysia and Singapore were caught up in their own anti-Communist suppressions that overwhelmingly targeted their ethnic Chinese populations. Indeed, the Chinese diasporas were thought to be working intimately with China to plot a communist takeover of Southeast Asia.⁸⁸ Since the regional emergence of communism was predominantly blamed on Southeast Asia's Chinese populations, it is hardly surprising that the language of race and ethnicity has permeated into the post-facto narrativization of the 1965 genocide. The prevalence of anti-communist paranoia in the region, coupled with actual experiences of regional neighbors fighting ethnically Chinese communists, made the political motivations, political objectives, and, indeed, political identities of the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia *conflatable* with the most salient fear of communism: that they were adherents of an ideology seeking to dismantle and replace Muslims' existing ways of life. In other words, beyond merely being perceived as communists, the ethnic Chinese were characterized as political usurpers. This explains why Islamists such as Nasir propagate the belief that Indonesian Chinese today still seek to “steal Indonesian resources” and decimate “indigenous” *Muslim* ways of life.⁸⁹ To the Islamists, the very fact that Ahok had the audacity to be Jokowi's running mate in 2012, let alone run for office himself in 2017, triggered the historical fear of an attempted political takeover by the ethnic Chinese.

Additionally, the fact that Ahok, a non-Muslim, was already “running the capital of the country with the world's biggest Muslim population” since 2014, only heightened

⁸⁴ Robert Cribb, “Genocide in Indonesia, 1965–1966,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 3, 2 (2001): 219–39. An invention of Sukarno's, “Nasakom” combines the ideologies of *nasionalisme* (nationalism), *agama* (religion), and *komunisme* (communism).

⁸⁵ Katharine E. McGregor, “Confronting the Past in Contemporary Indonesia: The Anti-Communist Killings of 1965–66 and the Role of the Nahdlatul Ulama,” *Critical Asian Studies* 41, 2 (2009): 195–224.

⁸⁶ Robert Cribb and Charles A. Coppel, “A Genocide That Never Was: Explaining the Myth of Anti-Chinese Massacres in Indonesia, 1965–66,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 11, 4 (2009): 447–65.

⁸⁷ Cribb and Coppel, “A Genocide That Never Was.”

⁸⁸ The reality is more nuanced. While many communist parties in Singapore, Malaya, Borneo, and Thailand were dominated by the Chinese diaspora, the Indonesian Communist Party was largely led by local Indonesian leaders. See Hara Fujio, “Chinese Overseas and Communist Movements in Southeast Asia,” in *Routledge Handbook of the Chinese Diaspora*, ed. Tan Chee Beng (London: Routledge, 2013).

⁸⁹ Jones, “Indonesia's Illiberal Turn.”

the sense of urgency among Islamists seeking to oust him.⁹⁰ To them, the symbolism of being led by a non-Muslim was an outrageous violation of Islamic norms, since they believe it to be indisputable that Muslims can only be ruled by a Muslim.⁹¹ The fact that Ahok chose to participate in gubernatorial politics in the Indonesian capital only elevated the Islamists' fear of being governed, not just by a non-Muslim, but in a manner that was categorially un-Islamic. Thus, Habib Rizieq Shihab firmly rejected the notion that a non-Muslim can be a leader in a Muslim country. Citing Verse 144 in the Quran's An-Nisa' chapter, which states:

O you who have believed, do not take the disbelievers as leaders instead of the believers. Do you wish to give Allah against yourselves?⁹²

For Rizieq, this is a clear indication that Islam forbids its followers from choosing a non-Muslim as their leader. The fact that Jokowi moved on from the governorship to the Indonesian presidency in 2014 appears to have reconfigured the political significance of Jakarta's governor's office. Not only was it rumored that Ahok might move on from the governorship to be Jokowi's running mate for the 2019 presidential elections, it was also suggested that Ahok himself might seek to become Indonesia's president down the road.⁹³ Faced with the prospect of one day having the entirety of the world's largest Muslim country led by a non-Muslim, a scenario that undoubtedly would be disastrous for the Islamists, it became imperative to raise the vitriol by making crude allegations of blasphemy against Ahok to force his electoral loss and remove him from office. Thus, at the anti-Ahok rallies, protestors carried banners stating that (1) Ahok be jailed for his anti-Islamic statements, (2) he was Satan incarnate, (3) rallying against Ahok was a form of *jihad*, (4) he was a national threat, and (5) he and the ethnic Chinese ought to be crushed (*ganyang*).⁹⁴ When read in the context of the Islamists' fear of ethnic Chinese gaining political clout, it becomes clear to me that these symbolic attacks were directed not just at Ahok, but were intended to scare Indonesian Chinese away from even thinking about participating in politics.

⁹⁰ Simon Roughneen, "The Islamist Challenge to Jokowi," *Foreign Affairs*, December 8, 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/indonesia/2016-12-08/islamist-challenge-jokowi>

⁹¹ "Does the Quran Forbid Electing Christians?" *The Atlantic*, April 18, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/04/indonesia-ahok-muslim/523002/>

⁹² Interview with Habib Rizieq Shihab, November 2016.

⁹³ "Ahok: Indonesia's Religious Tolerance on Trial?" *Al Jazeera*, May 9, 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/talktojazeera/2017/01/ahok-indonesia-religious-tolerance-trial-170128084747099.html>

⁹⁴ See: Adam Harvey, "Jakarta Governor Ahok's Blasphemy Trial to Test Indonesia's Reputation for Religious Tolerance," *ABC News*, December 13, 2016, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-12-13/ahok-labelled-the-son-of-satan-by-cleric/8114614>; *Asian Correspondent* staff, "Anti-Ahok Posters Flood Jakarta Streets ahead of Tense Run-off Election," *Asian Correspondent*, March 15, 2017, <https://asiancorrespondent.com/2017/03/anti-ahok-posters-flood-jakarta-streets-ahead-tense-run-off-election/>; Nyshka Chandran, "How the Islamic State Is Exploiting Jakarta Elections," *CNBC*, November 10, 2016, <https://www.cnbc.com/2016/11/10/how-the-islamic-state-is-exploiting-jakarta-elections.html>; Jacob J, "Amnesty Criticises Indonesia for Blasphemy Probe against Governor Ahok," *International Business Times*, November 17, 2016, <http://www.ibtimes.sg/amnesty-criticises-indonesia-blasphemy-probe-against-governor-ahok-4767>; and Noor Huda Ismail, "How Jakarta's First Chinese Indonesian Governor became an Easy Target for Radical Islamic Groups," *The Conversation*, November 7, 2016, <https://theconversation.com/how-jakartas-first-chinese-indonesian-governor-became-an-easy-target-for-radical-islamic-groups-68178>

Equating *Abangans* with Christians and Chinese

A third form of symbolic violence the uncivil groups have used is to attack *abangan* Muslims by denouncing them as un-Islamic and discursively equating them with the Christian minority, and thus placing them in the same rubric as the Indonesian Chinese—of whom an estimated 70 percent are Christian.⁹⁵ The starting point for their equation of *abangan* Muslims with Christianity is their disdain for Jokowi. Having been labeled an *abangan* Muslim, Jokowi is not a popular figure among many of Indonesia's devout Islamic quarters, including followers of modernist Islam. This deep cleavage harks back to the 2014 presidential election, when the modernists and Islamists were seen to be overwhelmingly in support of Jokowi's political rival, Prabowo Subianto. At the time, Nasir publicly claimed that Jokowi was a *kafir* (infidel) and would make Indonesia a country of infidels if he won the election.⁹⁶ Nasir was also at the forefront of the anti-Ahok movement in late 2016. In addition, actors like FUI have been consistent in their denunciation of the Jokowi administration. In the months leading up to the 2014 presidential elections, the FUI's official news outlet, Suara Islam, ran stories chastising Jokowi as a covert Christian.⁹⁷ The impact of the smear campaign during the 2014 presidential election was substantial enough to force Jokowi to publish his marriage certificate on Facebook to prove that he was truly Muslim.⁹⁸ Indeed, to underscore the fact that he is Muslim, he even performed the *umrah* just days before the election on July 9.⁹⁹

Abangans are ahistorically¹⁰⁰ deemed to refer to Javanese Muslims who subscribe to a mystical form of religious belief that incorporates Hindu, Buddhist, and local animist features with Islam.¹⁰¹ The category itself has evolved over time and refers to Indonesian Muslims who are oriented towards the state's Pancasila ideology.¹⁰² While

⁹⁵ Roderick Brazier, "In Indonesia, the Chinese Go to Church," *The New York Times*, April 27, 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/04/27/opinion/in-indonesia-the-chinese-go-to-church.html>

⁹⁶ "Ustadz Bachtiar Nasir: Selangkah Lagi Jokowi Kafirkan Indonesia!" *JurnalMuslim.com*, March 17, 2014, <http://www.jurnalmuslim.com/2016/09/ustadz-bachtiar-nasir-selangkah-lagi-jokowi-membuat-indonesia-kafir.html>

⁹⁷ See: Kwok, "Where Memes Could Kill"; Tim Lindsey, "Jokowi in Indonesia's 'Neo-New Order,'" *East Asia Forum*, November 7, 2017, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2017/11/07/jokowi-in-indonesias-neo-new-order/>; and Tobias Basuki, "Jakarta's First Ethnic Chinese Governor Takes Indonesia Forward," *The Conversation*, August 22, 2014, <https://theconversation.com/jakartas-first-ethnic-chinese-governor-takes-indonesia-forward-30708>

⁹⁸ Yenni Kwok, "Indonesia's Obama Is Actually Nothing of the Sort," *Time*, May 20, 2014, <http://time.com/105650/indonesias-obama-is-actually-nothing-of-the-sort/>

⁹⁹ "Jokowi Goes for Minor Haj before Presidential Polls on July 9," *The Straits Times*, July 5, 2014, <http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/jokowi-goes-for-minor-haj-before-presidential-polls-on-july-9>

¹⁰⁰ Ricklefs, "The Birth of the *Abangan*."

¹⁰¹ This description of *abangans* is dependent on a simplistic understanding of Islamic practices in Indonesia. The notion that Muslims in the region could be divided into binaries has little historical veracity. However, it is not in the scope of this paper to add to this debate. What is more, it is also important to note that even if such systems of classification are fallacious, the far-right Islamists have nonetheless been successful in perpetuating these false dichotomies by using the *abangan* label to condemn those whom they believe are un-Islamic. So long as the discursive space enables it, fallaciously defined categories, too, can take on a life of their own and reproduce myths such as the *abangan-santri* divide.

¹⁰² For the declining number of *abangan* Muslims, see Robert Hefner, "Where Have All the *Abangan* Gone? Religionization and the Decline of Non-standard Islam in Indonesia," in *Religious Change in Modern Southeast Asia*, ed. Rémy Madinier and Michel Picard (London: Routledge, 2011), 71–91.

it is ahistorical to label the *abangan* as non-Muslim, the very fact that Jokowi was condemned as being a *kafir* indicates the intention to excommunicate, and thus exclude him from the parameters of being Muslim because of his perceived infidelity. That *kafir* is a term regularly exploited to justify the mass murder of non-Muslims—and crucially, Muslims *deemed* to be non-Muslim—underscores the severity of being labeled as one. Thus, the syncretism that is the defining characteristic of what it means to be *abangan* quickly shifts from being improperly and insufficiently Islamic to being outright un-Islamic.¹⁰³ Once demarcated as a *kafir*, the leap to becoming characterized as a member of another religion, Christianity, requires little imagination. Christians make up Indonesia's second-largest religious population.¹⁰⁴ A number of Islamists have framed Christians as a small but rapidly growing demographic segment that is intent on Christianizing Indonesia at the expense of Islam.¹⁰⁵ As such, when Islamist groups circulated the misinformation that Jokowi was a covert Christian,¹⁰⁶ they in effect sought to complete the removal of his Muslim identification and repackage him as a Christian threat to Islam. What's more, the fact that they perceived him to be *covertly* fighting on behalf of Christianity implies their fear that Indonesia and Islam were at risk of succumbing to a carefully calculated, gradual, and thus undetectable religio-political conquest.

Jokowi's decision to run for governor with Ahok in 2012, as well as his support for Ahok's bid for the governorship in 2017, provided additional ammunition for those who sought to cement his (Jokowi's) association with Christianity (since a sizeable proportion of Indonesian Chinese are Christian).¹⁰⁷ Indeed, in the minds of the Islamists opposing Jokowi, a Muslim would not tolerate let alone champion a non-Muslim candidate. Having already characterized the ethnic Chinese as anti-Islamic people who seek to seize complete control of Indonesia, the added dimension of them being largely Christian exasperates the magnitude of the perceived threat they possess to Islam. That Jokowi would campaign with and support Ahok, a Chinese *and* Christian, could be made digestible only by seeing him as a co-Christian operative orchestrating the political ascendancy of the Indonesian Chinese.

This point was elucidated by Al-Khaththath when he stated that the FUI had found "evidence" that Jokowi supported Christian evangelist activities, and that under his presidency the number of Christian in Indonesia had grown significantly.¹⁰⁸ Al-Khaththath also believes that Jokowi is not only backed by Christian interests, but continues to work against the interest of Muslims. Citing the decision by the Jokowi government to ban Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia, Al-Khaththath argued that the ban is just the beginning of a series of moves by the Jokowi government to curtail the influence of Islamic groups. Al-Khaththath is convinced that the government will move to ban

¹⁰³ Hefner, "Where Have All the *Abangan* Gone?"

¹⁰⁴ Chang-Yau Hoon, "Mapping Chineseness on the Landscape of Christian Churches in Indonesia," *Asian Ethnicity* 17, 2 (2016): 228–47.

¹⁰⁵ Nadirsyah Hosen, "Race and Religion in the 2012 Jakarta gubernatorial Election: The Case of Jokowi-Ahok," in *Religion, Law and Intolerance in Indonesia*, ed. Tim Lindsey and Helen Pausacker (London: Routledge, 2016), 180–94.

¹⁰⁶ See: Kwok, "Where Memes Could Kill"; Lindsey, "Jokowi in Indonesia's 'Neo-New Order'"; and Basuki, "Jakarta's First Ethnic Chinese Governor Takes Indonesia Forward."

¹⁰⁷ Brazier, "In Indonesia, the Chinese Go to Church."

¹⁰⁸ Interview with Muhammad Al-Khaththath, November 2016.

other groups, such as FUI and FPI.¹⁰⁹ Thus, Jokowi has been labeled a proxy for the double-minority takeover of Indonesia. The twin Chinese-Christian threat was emphasized during an interview with Nasir, who noted that the Chinese have excessive wealth due to the Indonesian government's ill-conceived past policies. He added that these Chinese individuals are using their wealth to spread Christianity, which he deemed as a threat to Indonesian Muslims.¹¹⁰

The Future Trajectory of Uncivil Islamic Groups

The Islamist groups spearheading the anti-Ahok movement in late 2016 and early 2017 employed strategies of symbolic violence to spread anti-Ahok sentiment and gain mass support, and, in doing so, ideologically assault the Indonesian Chinese and Indonesian Christians. Islamist groups used anti-Ahok rallies to rationalize their use of symbolic violence against not just Ahok, but Indonesian Chinese and Indonesian Christians more generally. Three dynamics supported the anti-Ahok, -Chinese, and -Christianity efforts: through Ahok's ethnic identification, the Indonesian Chinese were conflated with China, communist ungodliness, and, thus, a quasi-demonic threat to Islam; Ahok's rise to the governorship was framed as a symbol of the perceived ascendance of Indonesian Chinese to positions of political power to the detriment of Muslims; and (3) Ahok was claimed to be leading the charge of a Christian takeover of Indonesia by co-opting *abangan* Muslims such as Jokowi into his ranks.

The uncivil Islamist groups that led the anti-Ahok movement in late 2016 have consolidated their standing and emerged as a force to be reckoned with in Indonesia's mainstream politics, particularly because there continues to be significant public debate about and interest in the role of Islam in Indonesian society. The 2018 regional elections in West Kalimantan saw a vitriolic display akin to the anti-Ahok movement resurface during the electoral contest.¹¹¹ In a contest pitting a Christian, Dayak candidate Karolin Margaret Natasa, against a Malay-Muslim candidate, Sutarmidji, strategies similar to the anti-Ahok movement were employed by conservative Muslim groups, including the FPI and the Persatuan Orang Melayu (POM), which led Muslim voters to support Sutarmidji.¹¹² Likewise, it is likely that the same mobilization strategy will be employed in the upcoming Indonesian presidential elections. More insidious, though, is the long-term implications the mobilization of symbolic violence may have on Indonesia's religio-political landscape. Indeed, the symbolic assault against *abangans* is ominous. While Jokowi remained the explicit target of the symbolic vitriol, the discursive equations the Islamists manufactured—*abangans* equal Christians, and Christians equal Chinese—are problematic, precisely because they give to those who wish to see an Islam free of syncretic elements an implicit license to widen the scope of assault to encompass anyone perceived to be a traditionalist. It then becomes immaterial whether Jokowi himself continues to participate in politics.

¹⁰⁹ Interview with Muhammad Al-Khaththath.

¹¹⁰ Interview with Bachtiar Nasir.

¹¹¹ Deasy Simandjuntak, "Commentary: Cards Stacked against Jokowi in Indonesia's New Political Landscape," *Channel News Asia*, January 16, 2018, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asiapacific/commentary-cards-stacked-against-jokowi-in-indonesia-s-new-9848476>

¹¹² For a more detailed analysis of the West Kalimantan elections, see IPAC, "Update on Local Election Results in West Kalimantan and Papua," August 16, 2018, IPAC Report No. 50.

Instead, the door opens for entire communities of people to become targets of symbolic assault. Thus, the extent of symbolic damage that such narratives can inflict on the people they target reverberates far beyond the domain of formal politics (elections and campaigns), and threads itself into the psyche of the country's ethno-religious fabric. The discursive weapons can be called upon to symbolically attack anyone who can be logically connected to the ethno-religious chains of equivalences that have already been constructed. It remains to be seen how deep the seeds of discord have been planted.