

Indonesian presidential elections: For Prabowo, a Dangerous Alliance With Islamic Hard-Liners

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Jakarta. For all the allegations of war crimes and human rights abuses re-emerging against Prabowo Subianto, the presidential candidate has at least been spared the ignominy of religious intolerance accusations.

Until now, that is, as the party of his running mate, Hatta Rajasa, seeks to win over the Islamic hard-line fringe, in a complete affront to the values in which it was conceived.

Hatta and Amien Rais, the chairman and chief patron, respectively, of the National Mandate Party, or PAN, have in the past week come in for criticism over their courting of the Islamic Defenders Front, or FPI, a radical group notorious for mob attacks on religious minorities, and which in the past has had legal wrangles with Amien over his defense of religious pluralism.

Speaking at a religious gathering at Jakarta's Al Azhar Mosque last Tuesday, Amien called on the leaders of the FPI and the other hard-line groups in attendance to support Prabowo and Hatta in the July 9 election, saying that "all Muslims must be united" behind the ticket.

"There are all the indications that this is our second golden chance," he said, adding that the previous opportunity - the 1999 elections in which a host of Islamic parties were for the first time in more than three decades free to contest the polls - "wasn't our time just yet."

Hatta, in a direct plea to Rizieq Shihab, the FPI's grand imam, urged the organization to back his ticket, echoing a call just days earlier by Prabowo for the coalition to embrace all community groups, "including the FPI."

But given the litany of rights abuse allegations already stacked against the candidate, appealing to the hard-line Islamic fringe was "an unwise move," according to Muhammad Subhi Azhari, a researcher at the Wahid Institute, founded by the late former president Abdurrahman "Gus Dur" Wahid.

"It's not very judicious. People will get the impression that [Prabowo] tolerates violence," Subhi said in Jakarta on Saturday. "They're not setting a good example at all for the people of Indonesia."

Subhi noted that in the Wahid Institute's latest annual report on religious intolerance, the FPI ranked second among the institutions that committed the most violations against religious freedom and the right to worship. (Top of the list, covering incidents throughout 2013, was the government-funded Indonesian Council of Ulema, or MUI, which purports to be the country's highest authority on Islam.)

Complicating matters, Hatta and Amien, who serves on Prabowo's campaign team, now face accusations of campaigning in a place of worship - a strict no-no under Indonesian electoral law.

Instant endorsement

For its part, the FPI has already indicated it may back Prabowo, with Rizieq telling followers on May 24 that the group would “instantly” endorse him if he committed to slew of conditions, including disbanding the Ahmadiyah – a minority Islamic sect that has been the frequent target of FPI attacks – and evaluating the police’s counterterrorism squad, Densus 88, which he accused of “murdering Muslims.”

“We’re not asking for ministerial posts or anything like that. What we want is for [Prabowo] to give something to Islam,” Rizieq said. “If he can commit to defending Islam, then the FPI will instantly declare its support for him. We will mobilize all our members [...] to campaign on behalf of Prabowo and Hatta.”

(Rizieq was speaking, incidentally, at the Taman Yasmin housing estate in Bogor, where city authorities have refused to allow the reopening of a Protestant church, in direct violation of two Supreme Court rulings. The Bogor administration claims the GKI Yasmin congregation did not have the proper permit to build the church; it was not clear if the FPI had a permit for their own gathering.)

Rizieq also called on Muslims not to vote for a president who would allow Jakarta Deputy Governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, a Christian, to become governor – in a clear swipe at Joko Widodo, the current governor and Prabowo’s rival in the presidential race. Basuki, already the acting governor, will automatically succeed Joko if the latter wins the presidency.

Islamic hard-liners had previously rounded on Basuki, a Chinese-Indonesian, because of his religion and ethnicity during campaigning for the 2012 Jakarta gubernatorial election – which he and Joko went on to win convincingly.

Lending weight to the probability of the FPI endorsing Prabowo is the candidate’s policy stance on religious affairs.

The manifesto published by his Great Indonesia Movement Party, or Gerindra, acknowledges that while every individual is free to worship according to their beliefs, “the state must regulate that freedom.”

“The state is also charged with ensuring the purity of religious teaching [to prevent] blasphemy,” it reads. “Given the importance of religion and interfaith harmony, Gerindra is committed to always ensuring freedom of religion, safeguarding the purity of religious teaching, and guiding interfaith harmony.”

Groups like the FPI and the MUI have long cited their defense of this “purity” of Sunni Islamic jurisprudence as justification for their attacks and discriminatory policies against groups like the Ahmadiyah and Shiites.

Amien’s slide

For many, though, the most regrettable development in the whole matter has been the embrace of both Prabowo and the hard-liners by Amien, once considered a leading light of the democracy movement that Prabowo tried to crush in 1998, and a staunch defender of the moderate Islamic wave that the FPI and its ilk have long railed against.

“I’m actually not surprised by this, because Amien Rais was never a true reformer; he was just able to tell which side would win at the time,” says Bonar Tigor Naipospos, the deputy director of the

Setara Institute, which advocates for religious tolerance and democracy.

He says Amien has abandoned the human rights cause for political benefits, a notion echoed by Haris Azhar of the Commission for Missing Persons and Victims of Violence, or Kontras.

“People like [Amien] have forgotten the suffering that ushered in the era of democracy in Indonesia. It seems his slide began with his ouster of Gus Dur,” Haris says, referring to Amien’s central role in agitating for Wahid’s impeachment in 2001, after having nominated him in 1999.

The Jakarta Globe

* Jakarta Globe on 10:45 am Jun 01, 2014:

<http://www.thejakartaglobe.com/news/prabowo-dangerous-dalliance-islamic-hard-liners/>

FPI Sought Out Prabowo-Hatta, Not Other Way Around, Spokesman Claims

Jakarta. An official from the coalition backing the presidential ticket of Prabowo Subianto and Hatta Rajasa has denied that the latter specifically sought out the support of Islamic hard-liners, even as a conditional endorsement was tendered.

“It wasn’t us looking for the support of the FPI” — Islamic Defenders Front — “but it was they who came to a religious gathering to offer their support to Prabowo and Hatta,” Bara Hasibuan, a spokesman for Prabowo’s campaign team, said on Thursday.

The ticket has come under criticism for courting the FPI, a radical group notorious for mob attacks on religious minorities and illegal raids on legitimate businesses selling alcohol.

Hatta and Amien Rais, the chairman and chief patron, respectively, of the National Mandate Party, or PAN, made the call during a gathering with the FPI and other hard-line groups at Jakarta’s Al Azhar Mosque on May 27.

Bara said the coalition, led by Prabowo’s Great Indonesia Movement Party, or Gerindra, did not condone religious intolerance or violence but would still welcome the endorsement of the FPI.

“Even though the FPI is known for violent acts, as a party with pluralist platform we can’t refuse such support. Our coalition welcomes all support, no matter what the background of the supporter,” he said.

His statements came as the FPI said separately that it would indirectly endorse Prabowo by throwing its support behind the three Islamic parties in his coalition: the PAN, the Prosperous Justice Party, or PKS, and the United Development Party, or PPP.

Muchsin Alatas, the FPI chairman, said in Jakarta on Wednesday that his organization believed in the “integrity” of the three parties. (The PKS president was in December last year sentenced to 16 years in prison in a corruption case; PPP chairman Suryadharma Ali was last week charged in a separate graft scandal.)

Muchsin said one of the conditions for the FPI’s support of the parties was for Prabowo, if elected,

not to block any local bylaws based on Islamic shariah.

Other conditions are for the candidate to promise to “fight immorality” and “free Indonesia from the imported mind-set of imperialism and liberalism.”

Rizieq Shihab, the FPI’s grand imam, previously said that if the Prabowo could commit to “defending Islam,” he would earn their “instant” endorsement.

“We’re not asking for ministerial posts or anything like that. What we want is for [Prabowo] to give something to Islam,” Rizieq said on May 24.

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* Jakarta Globe on 01:08 pm Jun 07, 2014:

<http://www.thejakartaglobe.com/news/fpi-sought-prabowo-hatta-way-around-spokesman-claims/>
