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Singapore | 24 Feb 2014

Resisting Democracy: Front Pembela Islam and Indonesia's 2014 Elections

*By Ian Wilson (Guest Writer)**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- This year, 2014, is election year in Indonesia. There are however vigilantes such as Front Pembela Islam (FPI; Defenders of Islam Front) who reject secular democracy and instead advocate a return to what they argue are the Islamic foundations of the Indonesian constitution and state ideology.
- But despite declaring democracy *haram* (sinful), the FPI and other such groups have proven themselves adept at manipulating the dynamics of Indonesia's decentralised electoral system to their advantage, obtaining key policy concessions and positioning themselves as brokers for political elites seeking to capture the conservative Muslim vote.
- These have found ideological bedfellows amongst New Order apologists seeking to roll back democratic reforms. Calls for 'democratic downgrading' from political parties such as Partai Demokrat, considered alongside the authoritarian credentials of a number of frontrunner presidential candidates suggest that Indonesia's democratic future is by no means secure.
- In the run-up to the elections for the presidency and national legislature in 2014, a number of political parties have shown interest in forming alliances with the FPI. The key exception has been the PDI-P and its likely presidential candidate, the governor of Jakarta Joko Widodo.

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INTRODUCTION

“Democracy is more dangerous than pig’s meat!” declared Habib Rizieq Shihab, leader of the Front Pembela Islam (FPI; Defenders of Islam Front) during a speech at a local branch in West Java in April 2013.¹ According to Rizieq, embracing democracy was tantamount to abandoning fundamentals of the Islamic faith, posing a far greater threat to the spiritual integrity of the *ummah* than the consumption of forbidden substances such as pork. “If we consume pig”, he stated, “we are polluted, but can still be returned to a state of purity if we cleanse ourselves seven times. If we eat it we’ve sinned, however we haven’t become an infidel.”

Democracy, however, he argued, marks an irredeemable point of no return. “If democracy is fully embraced by Muslims, and the laws of Allah in turn ignored, then they become apostates (*murtad*). Democracy can transform us into infidels”.

Established in 1998, and initially subsidised by the military and police as part of a street-level militia mobilised against the student-led reform movement, the FPI has now for over 15 years expressed ‘alarm’ and outrage at liberal democracy, representing it as a threat to Islamic practice and belief. Many in Indonesia consider it the latest manifestation of political thuggery, albeit wearing religious robes rather than the camouflage fatigues of former regime henchmen such as the *Pemuda Pancasila*, but with far greater autonomy from its patrons; itself a product of the greater freedom of organisation available in the post-New Order period. Its mission statement, the Quranic edict of *amar makruf nahi mungkar* (to command the good and forbid the bad), is framed as a necessary defensive response to the excesses unleashed by Indonesia’s post-authoritarian transition. As one FPI leader expressed it, “democratic reform opened the door for change, the problem however is that just about anyone or anything has been able to walk through that door...pornographers, homosexuals, apostates, all manner of heresy and deviancy”. The door of democratic reform, in their opinion, needs to be closed shut.

Despite its unambiguous rejection of electoral democracy as being antithetical to Islam, and as a virtual ‘pathway to hell’, hardliners and conservatives such as the FPI have nonetheless proved adept in playing a particular kind of politics shaped by the broader framework of Indonesia’s decentralised electoral system. The FPI has carved out a niche for itself in the political landscape by intentionally prising open social tensions and instigating moral panics through which it has sought to situate itself as a broker; as a kind of morality racketeer. Some of its successes include pressuring the state to legalize the persecution of religious minorities (in particular followers of the Ahmadiyah sect); politicising the previously uncontentious issue of church construction in Muslim majority neighbourhoods; influencing anti-pornography legislation; and forcing the government to ban a number of musical and cultural events such as a

¹ *Arrahmah.com*, ‘Habib Rizieq: Demokrasi lebih bahaya dari babi’, 2 April, 2013, <http://www.arahmah.com/news/2013/04/02/habib-rizieq-demokrasi-lebih-bahaya-dari-babi.html>

concert by US pop star Lady Gaga. They have also proven adept at strategically positioning themselves as key brokers for political parties and elites seeking to capture the perceived 'Muslim vote', particularly as found in the broader conservative shift within mainstream Indonesian Islam over the past decade. As such, they have been able to punch far above their weight in terms of the ability to influence local government policies. The organisation is relatively small in size, with an active national membership of at most one to two hundred thousand.

The 'anti-democracy' stance has become in effect a valuable and increasingly popular form of political capital. It is also not limited to Islamists, with a number of groups and individuals advocating various types of 'democratic downgrading', from the ending of regional direct elections advocated by the Democrat Party, to the increasing expressions of sentimentality for the Suharto era. As Jacqui Baker has noted, the failure of President Yudhoyono to implement key reforms during his two terms, such as overhauls of the endemically corrupt judicial system, police force and military will leave in place a "framework for authoritarianism".² Considering the authoritarian credentials of a number of frontrunner presidential candidates for 2014, Indonesia's democratic future is by no means secure.

MUSYAWARAH, NOT DEMOCRACY

What is it about Indonesia's post-1998 democracy that apparently so reviles Islamists such as the FPI? And what do they see as their preferred alternative? In his book-length treatise, *Wawasan Kebangsaan: Menuju NKRI Bersyariah* (National Concept: Achieving a Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia Ruled by Syariah Law), Habib Rizieq identifies the so-called 'problem of democracy' in Indonesia as a problem of history requiring a return to what he argues are the Islamic foundations of the Indonesian republic and constitution. According to Rizieq, there was never any constitutional declaration that Indonesia was a 'democratic state'; rather the fourth principle of the state ideology of Pancasila establishes the republic as a nation based upon *musyawarah* and *mufakat*, or consensus decision-making through deliberation, which he claims is an authentic Islamic tradition and the mode of governance practiced by the Prophet Muhammad, or the "government of Allah". Unlike Islamist groups such as Hizbut Tahrir or the Majelis Mujahedin Indonesia, the FPI does not reject the Pancasila as a national ideology, but instead argues that its inherently Islamic foundations have been misinterpreted and subverted by the infiltration of Western notions of majority-rule democracy and values of liberalism and secularism which are all flawed human-created value systems.

The FPI insists that *musyawarah-mufakat* is a form of decision-making process fundamentally different from the 'majority rules' logic of secular democracy which can

² Jacqui Baker (2012), 'Indonesia and Australia: what makes neighbours good friends?', East Asia Forum, 17 August, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2012/08/17/indonesia-and-australia-what-makes-neighbours-good-friends/>

be easily manipulated and guided by human weakness; and which results in the creation of rules and laws in direct conflict with Islam. Embracing *musyawarah* as both an Islamic principle of government and as a foundation of the Indonesian constitution would require an end to electoral democracy in its current form. The concept of *NKRI Bersyariah* articulated by Rizieq and the FPI occupies in this respect a middle-ground between Islamists who reject the constitution and the republic entirely, and that of secular and authoritarian nationalists who reject liberal forms of democracy but see no exclusivist place for Islam.

The second key point for the FPI is the need to re-include the Jakarta Charter in the Indonesian Constitution. The core of the charter was the addition of six words to the first principle of the Pancasila, where “Belief in Almighty God” is qualified with “the obligation to follow Islamic Syariah for all Muslims”. In what the FPI considers to be a historical betrayal, the amendment was eventually dropped by nationalists including Sukarno and Hatta in the final drafting.

The FPI’s stance then is nationalist rather than pan-Islamic, in so far as it reiterates the importance of the territorial integrity of the republic, and the centrality of the Constitution and the Pancasila. In recent times, it has engaged in overtly nationalistic demonstrations, for example, outside the Australian Embassy after revelations of spying on Indonesian government ministers, in what some suspect was a campaign to highlight its pro-nationalist credentials prior to the national legislative and presidential elections to be held in 2014.

In order to achieve its goal of *NKRI Bersyariah*, the FPI and its allies such as the Forum Umat Islam or FUI, have engaged in street protests and mobilisations, regular acts of vigilante violence, and aggressive advocacy around select issues strategically chosen to generate maximum publicity. They have also flirted with the possibility of directly contesting via the democratic system they reject. For example, in 2008, the FPI briefly debated forming its own political party. They argued that existing Islamic parties, such as the PKS, PKB and PAN, had already lost their way, compromising their values by forming alliances with secularists, or embracing non-Muslims as candidates. The spirit of a ‘revolutionary Islam’, which concerned itself “only with the politics of Syariah, and not the politics of vested interests” was, in their view, no longer represented in the party system.³ Eventually, the idea was dropped, as it was considered to involve too many compromises.

Rizieq has also been championed by the organisation as a potential presidential candidate, together with a number of high-profile figures such as Cholil Ridwan, chairman of the Majelis Ulama Indonesia. The FPI’s position that the nation should be led by Islamic religious scholars rather than politicians is one with obvious appeal to the MUI, with whom the organisation has developed a mutually beneficial relationship as the ‘enforcer’ of its often controversial fatwa. Perhaps the most significant of these was the 2005 fatwa declaring liberalism, secularism and pluralism as *haram* (sinful

³ Interview with Habib Rizieq, Jakarta, December 2012.

or forbidden in Islam). In many respects, the fatwa was a conservative reaction to the growing popularity of liberal streams of thought within mainstream Islamic organisations such as Nahdatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, exemplified in the minds of conservatives by the *Jaringan Islam Liberal*, or Liberal Islam Network. The FPI however took the anti-liberalism directive further, not just as a rejection of the spread of liberal ideas, but as a wholesale critique of the existing democratic system. If liberalism was *haram*, then liberal democracy must also be *haram*. The anti-liberal movement has subsequently grown to encompass a broad coalition of Islamist groups together with conservatives from mainstream Islamic organisations.

Earlier in March 2011, al-Jazeera revealed the existence of a document outlining the structure of a so-called Revolutionary Islamic Council. Compiled by former Hizbut Tahrir leader, head of the Forum Umat Islam and close confidant of the FPI, Muhammad Al Khathath, it was formulated as an Islamist 'dream team'. Al Khathath explained that in the wake of the Bank Century corruption scandal there was a sense that the government could collapse at any time; hence it was necessary to formulate an alternative government to fill any resulting power vacuum. FPI figures feature prominently in the shadow cabinet, with Habib Rizieq as head of state, FPI spokesman and lawyer Munarman as Minister of Defence, and jailed radical cleric Abu Bakar Bashyir as part of a council of religious elders. Aside from Islamists, former New Order generals such as Tyasno Sudarto also featured in the shadow cabinet. While denying any knowledge of the document, Sudarto admitted to holding discussions with Islamist groups on the 'future of the nation', as they both shared a desire for a return to the Pancasila as they understood it, and a rejection of moves towards liberal democracy. The document created a brief furore, and was considered by some in Yudhoyono's camp as evidence of a military-Islamist plot to topple the government. It may have been little more than wishful thinking on the part of Al Khathath. However, this episode indicated that there was a point of ideological connection between New Order apologists seeking to roll back democratic reforms and Islamists. Rizieq has at times publicly praised former dictator Suharto as 'decisive' and 'charismatic'.

DEMOCRATIC MEANS TO AN UN-DEMOCRATIC END?

How then is the FPI situating itself in relation to the 2014 elections? In an official position statement released in August 2013, the FPI stated that the elections constituted a "period of dire emergency" for Indonesian Muslims, as it holds the danger that those who will gain control of the political reins could further the spread of apostasy (*kemurtadan*).⁴ To this end, the FPI implores Muslims to choose candidates and support political parties that display a commitment to enforcing Syariah Law and

⁴ *Arrahmah.com*, 'Sikap FPI Pemilu 2014: Darurat bagi umat Islam', 31 August 2013, <http://www.arahmah.com/news/2013/08/31/sikap-fpi-pemilu-2014-darurat-umat-islam.html>

reflecting the concerns of the *ummah*. Despite its rejection of democracy, the FPI encourages Muslims to participate in it as a means of ending it. As with most of its public pronouncements, the statement was also to advertise that the FPI was open to offering support to those willing to pay lip service to its pet issues.

The FPI has already indicated some of those whom it considers unacceptable candidates. An example is former general Wiranto and his political party Hanura, an initial sponsor of the FPI during his period as armed forces chief. This is ostensibly due to his objectionable public support for the hosting of the Miss World pageant in Indonesia. The FPI had strongly opposed the pageant with rowdy street demonstrations and threats of disruptions, resulting in the event being moved from Bogor in West Java to Bali. The pageant was also sponsored by Wiranto's vice-presidential candidate, the ethnic Chinese billionaire media mogul Harry Tanoesoedibjo, whom Rizieq has publicly referred to as an infidel and "pig", who needed to be "slaughtered and burnt".

The governor of West Java, Ahmad Heryawan, currently short-listed by the Islamist PKS as one of its five potential presidential candidates, is an FPI favourite. During his campaign for re-election in 2012, he had shown his amenability to making deals with the FPI, signing a political pledge that if returned to office he would outlaw Ahmadiyah and its activities in West Java. The strongest party support for the FPI has come from the Islamic PPP. The party's chairman and current Minister of Religion, Suryadharma Ali, has been a regular public advocate of the FPI, even extending an offer to its fiery public spokesman Munarman to run as a legislative assembly candidate. Questioned over the appropriateness of collaborating with a group infamous for its use of vigilante violence, Suryadharma argued that it was better than not to embrace radical organisations into the system where they could, in his words, "make a positive contribution". The PPP's reaching out to the FPI, as well as a number of other well-known Islamists, is part of an attempt to establish itself as a purely Islamic party, differentiating it from others such as the PKS who have supported non-Muslim candidates.

On the back of the FPI's announcement regarding the 2014 elections, Home Minister Gamawan Fauzi, who less than ten months earlier had threatened to forcibly disband the FPI via recently revised laws governing non-government organisations, followed Suryadharma's lead in stating in October 2013 that the FPI was now a 'national asset' and that regional and national leaders should work in partnership with them. Prabowo Subianto, considered a potential presidential frontrunner, responded positively to Gamawan's call by suggesting that the FPI could and should be "embraced". In short, there has been a considerable degree of renewed interest in 'engaging' with the FPI by political elites in the period leading up to the 2014 elections, which raises uncomfortable questions about their own commitment to democracy. It seems likely that part of the logic behind moves to form alliances with the FPI and other Islamist groups is a strategic calculation to secure votes from particular constituencies with minimal substantive concessions.

This needs to be situated in the context of predictions of increasing levels of non-participation and informal voting, or *Golput*.⁵ Only 7.7 per cent in the first post-New Order multi-party elections in 1999, non-participation had risen to close to 30 per cent by the national elections of 2009. Some have estimated that rates of *Golput* in 2014 could reach 40 per cent or even as high as 60 per cent. The reasons behind the increase in *Golput* are strongly debated. After all, it is difficult to attribute agency to acts of non-participation. However, the general consensus is that it reflects a growing disillusionment with the substance of institutional democracy. The almost daily revelations of governmental corruption at every level have seen the initial post-authoritarian euphoria slowly transform into a cynical disinterest, even disdain, towards the electoral process. Appealing to conservative Islamists and their sympathisers entails fairly minimal political concessions, such as adopting a hard-line stance against soft political targets like religious minorities, with the potential to electorally mobilise groups ideologically disinclined to vote. This arguably appears as a potentially easier electoral path for some parties and candidates than, for example negotiating demands for increases to the minimum wage with the growing trade union movement; or developing coherent policies for reducing Indonesia's growing poverty levels. Groups such as the FPI also have potential use, in the words of former police chief Sutanto, as 'attack dogs' that can be deployed against progressive or liberal social forces.

The main potential spoiler, from the FPI's perspective, is the immense popularity of Joko Widodo or Jokowi, the former mayor of Surakarta and current governor of Jakarta. Many expect that he will run as either a presidential or vice-presidential candidate, with most polls putting him far ahead of other candidates, aside from *Golput*. His party, the PDI-P, has remained one of the most openly hostile to the FPI and the least amenable to granting concessions or cutting deals with Islamist groups. The FPI has already butted heads with Jokowi's Jakarta administration, in particular the deputy governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, also known as Ahok, who publicly ridiculed Gamawan's suggestion of government-FPI collaboration. A similar rebuttal came from Ganjar Pranowo, the PDI-P governor of Central Java.

Some in Jokowi's inner circle have claimed that his popularity is undermining support for local Islamist groups such as the FPI in Jakarta, particularly amongst the urban poor who make up the bulk of the FPI's membership. The so-called Jokowi-effect, however, may also be overstated. Jokowi-endorsed candidates, for example, failed to win elections for governor in West Java and North Sumatra in 2013, losing in both cases to PKS-endorsed candidates.

⁵ *Golput*, or *Golongan Putih*, literally meaning 'White group', refers to an election boycott movement started by intellectuals in the early 1970s to reject the rigged pseudo-elections of the New Order. It has since become shorthand for active or passive non-participation in elections, or the intentional casting of invalid votes, as a political statement.

Ultimately any failure to significantly shape the outcome or the policy orientation of the winners of the 2014 elections will be attributed to the nature of democracy itself and its system of 'one person, one vote' where, in the words of Rizieq "the voice of a prostitute or an alcoholic is considered of equal value to that of an esteemed Ulama or Habib".

ISEAS Perspective is published electronically by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore.

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