

## The Dynamics of Identity Politics Polarization in the 2017 Jakarta Gubernatorial Election

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### ABSTRACT

*Identity politics has become an important element in the ongoing political dynamics of Indonesia, especially following increased social tensions and polarization during the general elections. This refers to the use of identities that are based on commonalities such as religion, ethnicity, or culture. In this context, these are used as the basis for political mobilization. Anies Baswedan has become a central figure often associated with symbols of certain identities, particularly since the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election and the 2024 general election.*

*This study aims to analyze how public communication can shape, produce, and reinforce the identity politics of Anies Baswedan's portrayal, as well as how this plays a role in political polarization in Indonesia.*

*This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study method to analyze in depth the complex socio-political phenomena from various political texts, media reports, speeches, and media posts during the period 2017-2024.*

*The results of the study show that Anies Baswedan is constructed on his strong identity narrative, reflecting tensions between majority and minority groups, conservatives and progressives. The media and political actors also play a very important role in directing this discourse for ideological and electoral interests. These findings confirm that identity politics, when influenced by public discourse, will deepen social fragmentation and could also threaten the integrity of democracy in Indonesia.*

**Keywords:** Polarization; Anies Baswedan; Identity Politics; Indonesia

### INTRODUCTION

Islamic politics has become an important part of Indonesia's political dynamics since the post-reform era. Various political parties and public figures have used Islamic symbols to gain support and political legitimacy. One figure who has attracted attention is Anies Baswedan, who comes from a family with a strong background in education and nationalism, and has experience in government and politics.

Anies Baswedan has been a strong candidate in several elections, including the Jakarta gubernatorial election and the presidential election. He has the support of several political parties with an Islamic base, such as the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) and the National Awakening Party (PKB). This shows that Anies Baswedan has the potential to play an important role in Islamic politics in Indonesia.

Anies Baswedan plays an important role in Islamic politics in Indonesia. He has demonstrated his ability to mobilize public support and influence public policy. However, Anies Baswedan's role in Islamic politics also faces challenges, such as how he positions himself in complex political dynamics and how he responds to criticism and controversy. This study is expected to contribute to the understanding of Islamic politics in Indonesia and the role of political figures in shaping the political dynamics in this country. In addition, this study can also be a reference for other researchers who wish to learn more about Islamic politics in Indonesia.

### **Problem Statement**

Based on the above background, several questions can be formulated:

1. What influenced Anies Baswedan to enter the world of Islamic politics after the reform era?
2. How does Anies Baswedan position himself in Islamic politics in Indonesia?
3. What are Anies Baswedan's strengths and weaknesses in playing the role of Islamic politics in Indonesia?

### **Research Objectives**

The objectives of this study are to:

1. Analyze the factors that influenced Anies Baswedan to enter the world of Islamic politics after the reform era.
2. Explain how Anies Baswedan positions himself in Islamic politics in Indonesia.
3. Identify the strengths and weaknesses of Anies Baswedan in playing his role in Islamic politics in Indonesia.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### The Theory of Political Identity and Affective Polarization in the 2017 Jakarta Regional Election Campaign Strategy

To understand political strategy in the context of Islamic political polarization, two main theoretical approaches are used: political identity theory and affective political polarization theory. Both explain how religious identity is constructed and used strategically in electoral politics, as well as how these strategies impact social fragmentation and democracy.

According to Castells (2010), identity is not something static and naturally inherent to individuals or groups, but rather a social construct formed through processes of communication, symbolization, and power relations. In the political context, identity becomes a strategic instrument that is actively shaped by various actors, such as political elites, the media, and support groups. Political identity is not only a reflection of a person's religious or ethnic background, but also the result of narratives developed for the purposes of social and political mobilization.

In the case of Anies Baswedan, Islamic identity is not merely a personal attribute, but is collectively constructed by his supporters through religious symbols such as the 212 action, narratives defending Muslims, and rejection of non-Muslim leaders. Although Anies does not explicitly declare himself a conservative Islamic leader, the symbolic construction and public discourse that has been built has created the image that he is a "leader of the people." This identity is performative and strategic, used to garner support from conservative Islamic groups without having to openly promote a formal Islamic ideological agenda.

(Castells, 2010) refers to this phenomenon as resistance identity, which is a form of identity that emerges in response to political or social domination that is perceived as threatening the existence of certain groups. In the context of the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election, the Islamic identity attached to Anies became a form of resistance against the domination of political elites who were perceived as secular, liberal, or even anti-Islam.

In line with this, the affective political polarization theory approach helps explain how this identity not only mobilizes support but also triggers sharp emotional divisions within society. McCoy et al. (2018) argue that political polarization becomes dangerous when it is

affective, that is, when differences in political views generate hatred and hostility towards other groups. This type of polarization is referred to as pernicious polarization, which can undermine the deliberative order in democracy and erode social trust between groups.

Religion-based political campaigns in the Jakarta regional elections show signs of this affective polarization. The use of terms such as "blasphemer," "enemy of the people," and the dichotomy of "Islam vs. infidels" created a political atmosphere that was no longer rational, but emotional and exclusive. In this situation, political opponents were not only criticized on the basis of their policies or programs, but also discredited because they were considered a threat to the collective identity of Muslims.

This phenomenon creates sharp social segregation, where people no longer determine their political choices based on the candidates' programs or track records, but based on symbolically constructed group identities. In such a situation, Anies Baswedan benefited politically because he was able to represent the symbol of resistance against the secular elite without needing to explicitly declare a particular religious ideology.

This kind of political polarization is not only limited to the electoral sphere, but also extends to the social and cultural dimensions. The identity tensions that occurred during the Jakarta regional elections had an impact on relations between community groups and narrowed the space for inclusive public discussion. Anies' supporters, through various digital and offline communication channels, often positioned their opponents as "anti-Islam" actors, blurring the line between policy- t criticism and identity attacks. In the long term, this has the potential to weaken social cohesion and undermine the quality of deliberative democracy in Indonesia.

Thus, Anies Baswedan's political strategy can be understood as the use of a resistive and performative construction of Islamic identity, combined with the dynamics of affective polarization that strengthens the emotional loyalty of his supporters. This strategy is effective electorally, but it poses serious challenges to social integration and the consolidation of democracy in the long term.

To understand Anies Baswedan's political strategy in the context of Islamic political polarization, two main theoretical approaches are used: identity politics theory and political polarization theory.

According to Castells (2010), identity is a social construct formed through processes of communication and symbolization. In the context of Anies Baswedan, identity as part of the "Muslim community" is not merely a religious attribute, but is shaped and strengthened by social interactions, the media, and collective narratives created by his supporters. He has become a symbol of resistance against the dominance of elite groups who are considered not to represent the interests of the majority.

Meanwhile, (McCoy et al., 2018) explains that political polarization becomes dangerous when it is affective, that is, when political differences trigger hostility between social groups. Anies' case shows that polarization does not only occur in the electoral sphere, but extends to the social and cultural spheres. Anies' supporters, through various communication channels, often position their political opponents as "anti-Islam," thereby blurring the line between policy criticism and identity attacks.

## METHODOLOGY

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach with a case study method, because the phenomenon of Islamic political polarization in the context of support for Anies Baswedan is complex, contextual, and cannot be reduced to mere statistics. The case study method allows for an in-depth exploration of the socio-political dynamics that emerged during and after the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election, in which religious identity became a powerful tool for political mobilization.

According to Moleong (2007), a qualitative approach is suitable for research that requires a deep understanding of meaning, symbols, and the accompanying social processes. In this case, Anies' political strategy cannot be separated from symbolic games and the construction of performative and strategic identities, even though he personally claims to hold a moderate political position.

This study also uses critical discourse analysis to examine how political narratives of identity are formed, disseminated, and mobilized by political actors and accepted by the public. This approach refers to the framework (Fairclough, 2013), which emphasizes the importance of analyzing the relationship between texts (e.g., campaign narratives and slogans), discursive practices (the process of discourse production and consumption), and

social practices (the socio-political implications of the discourse). Thus, this analysis not only captures the surface content of political discourse, but also unravels the symbolic and ideological meanings hidden behind political representations.

### **Data Collection Techniques**

Data in this study was collected through documentation techniques, which included a variety of sources to ensure diversity of perspective and data validity. The data sources used included:

- Mass media documents, including online news, magazine articles such as *Tempo* and *Kompas*, and popular Islamic portals;
- Social media posts, such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, both from Anies Baswedan's official account and his supporters' accounts;
- Anies Baswedan's political speeches, especially during the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election campaign;
- Public survey results from research institutions such as the Indonesian Survey Institute (LSI) and Saiful Mujani Research and Consulting (SMRC), which provide an overview of public opinion on polarization and perceptions of political identity;
- Academic documents and civil society organization reports, such as those published by the Setara Institute and the Wahid Foundation, which discuss issues of intolerance, identity, and democracy.

By combining these various types of data, the research is able to capture the complexity of the dynamics of the production and consumption of religious narratives in electoral politics.

### **Data Analysis Techniques**

As explained, the main analysis method used is critical discourse analysis. This analysis helps researchers understand how political identity discourse is produced and interpreted in a particular social context. This analysis is very effective in capturing the symbolic dimensions of political communication strategies, especially when identity is used as a tool of polarization that is not always explicit but is very effective in shaping public perception.

With this approach, the study concludes that Anies Baswedan's political strategy cannot be separated from the play of symbols and Islamic identity, which is reinforced by the support of conservative Islamic groups. This support creates his representation as a "figure of the people," which becomes the center of identity-based political loyalty and has an impact on broader social polarization.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### **Islamic Politics and Identity in the Context of Indonesian Democracy**

Islam has played a central role in Indonesia's political history, both as a value system, a collective identity, and a tool for mobilization (Castells, 2010). Since the national movement era, expressions of Islam have been an integral part of shaping national aspirations. However, after the 1998 Reformation, the role of Islam in Indonesian politics underwent significant changes. Democratization opened up more freedom for political competition, which at the same time also opened up new channels for the articulation of religious identity in political contests.

Within the framework of electoral democracy, Islamic politics emerged not only through Islamic-based parties such as PKS or PPP, but also through social-political mobilization that was not formally institutionalized. Islamic identity became a tool for building emotional connections between political actors and the voting public. Religious symbols such as the use of the jargon "ummah," the appearance of religious clothing, and morality-based slogans are often used to create symbolic differences with political opponents (Castells, 2010).

This phenomenon reflects the character of identity politics, which relies on cultural and religious symbols to create an "us" versus "them" dynamic (Castells, 2010). Identity is no longer merely a personal or spiritual attribute, but is politicized in the context of the struggle for power. In practice, Islamic identity politics often creates social fragmentation because it limits political discourse to the framework of "who is more Islamic," rather than "who has the best ideas" (McCoy et al., 2018). This poses a serious challenge to the development of deliberative democracy, which requires a rational and inclusive exchange of ideas.

## **Islamic Political Identity and Electoral Polarization in the Jakarta 2017 Gubernatorial Contest**

The 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election (Fautanu et al., 2020) was an important turning point in the development of Islamic politics in Indonesia, particularly in terms of the highly polarized manifestation of identity politics. Anies Baswedan, a moderate Muslim intellectual who previously served as Minister of Education and Culture, became a central actor in this dynamic. In the context of the election, he successfully garnered support from conservative Islamic groups such as the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), the National Movement to Guard the Ulama's Fatwa (GNPF), and figures involved in the 212 movement (Mietzner, 2018).

Support for Anies in the regional elections was not based solely on his policy program or technocratic capacity, but was largely driven by narratives of religion and ethnicity. His political opponent, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok), who is of Chinese ethnicity and Christian religion, became the target of massive identity attacks, especially after his statements were deemed blasphemous. The 212 rally and religious mass mobilization became symbols of the "rise of Muslims" in the face of "rulers who do not represent the people" (Mietzner, 2018).

Campaign narratives supporting Anies often frame political opponents as "not part of the community," reinforcing an exclusive socio-political dichotomy. Although Anies does not explicitly voice sectarian politics, he also does not take decisive steps to limit the use of exclusive symbols and narratives by his supporters (Mietzner, 2018). This raises ethical and strategic questions: is Anies' passivity towards polarization a form of political calculation, or simply uncontrolled neglect?

Social media plays a central role in spreading these identity narratives. Memes, video lectures, and chain messages emphasizing the importance of electing a "leader of the same faith" are effective instruments for targeting voters connected to informal religious networks (Lim, 2017). On the other hand, mosques and majelis taklim (religious gatherings) are not immune to politicization. Political sermons that corner political opponents often occur in religious spaces that are supposed to be neutral (Fealy, 2001).

This phenomenon shows that identity politics is not only present at the elite level, but has spread to the grassroots. It demonstrates a high capacity for mobilization but also has negative implications for social cohesion and the principle of inclusiveness in democracy (McCoy et al., 2018).

### **The Impact of Islamic Political Polarization on Democracy and Social Life**

Political polarization based on religious identity has a multidimensional impact on Indonesia's democratic system and social structure. In the context of the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election, this polarization not only resulted in electoral victory for certain candidates, but also triggered deep social divisions between groups with different political and religious views.

This phenomenon can be explained through the concept of affective polarization, as proposed by McCoy et al. (2018). They explain that polarization becomes dangerous when it does not merely reflect differences in opinion, but also gives rise to emotional hostility between groups. In the case of Indonesia, especially after the Jakarta regional elections, there has been a decline in the quality of public deliberation, where political opponents are no longer positioned as parties with different ideas, but are considered a threat to religious identity and the existence of one's own group.

This condition is exacerbated by the increase in cases of intolerance and violations of religious freedom. (Setara Institute, 2018) noted a spike in incidents of intolerance and discrimination against minority groups after the political contest. This shows that the use of religion as a political tool can erode the principle of pluralism and narrow the space for dialogue between religious communities. Public discourse has become dominated by exclusive narratives that reject differences, thereby reinforcing identity barriers within society.

Furthermore, (Mietzner, 2018) highlights the emergence of the phenomenon of *Islamist populism* in Indonesia, which contributes to the decline of democracy. In this Islamic populism, religious identity is used as a basis for political mobilization, which indirectly encourages homogenization in political representation and delegitimizes minority groups. Political elites, witnessing the success of this strategy, feel compelled to follow a similar

approach in order to maintain their electability, thereby extending the impact of polarization to the institutional realm.

Political campaigns that rely on religious sentiment, as seen in Anies Baswedan's candidacy, further reinforce the trend of identity-based polarization. This strategy not only affects election results but also changes the way society views politics more broadly. The quality of public deliberation has declined because differences of opinion are often framed as a betrayal of religion, rather than as a normal dynamic in democracy. As a result, it has become increasingly difficult for the public to accept diversity of opinion, even in non-political matters.

Democracy, which should be a rational arena for the exchange of political ideas, has now been degraded into a symbolic contest based on religious morality. Public debates have become emotional and exclusive, narrowing the space for compromise and collaboration across identities. In the long term, this threatens social cohesion by increasing the risk of segregation between groups at the grassroots level.

Not only that, religious polarization creates structural pressure on the political elite to take advantage of religious narratives in order to maintain electoral legitimacy. When this strategy is used continuously, the political space that should be inclusive and democratic is slowly pushed towards a radical direction that limits diversity of opinion. This situation poses a serious challenge to efforts to consolidate democracy in Indonesia, which actually requires tolerance, rationality, and respect for diversity as its main foundations.

## CONCLUSION

Islamic politics has been a central element in Indonesia's political development since the reform era. Political figures such as Anies Baswedan have emerged as important actors in this landscape, utilizing Islamic symbols as part of their political communication and mass mobilization strategies. Anies' strong background in education, nationalism, and his experience in government make him an interesting and complex figure in the discourse of identity politics.

Through a qualitative approach and case studies of public communications involving Anies Baswedan in the 2017–2024 period, this study finds that Anies' political identity is not only

shaped by himself, but also constructed by the media, political actors, and broader public discourse. The narratives attached to him both by supporters and political opponents often contain elements of identity based on religion, ethnicity, and culture, which indirectly reinforce social and political polarization.

The findings show that Anies has become a representation of the tension between majority and minority groups, conservatives and progressives. The media and political elites play a key role in reinforcing or opposing this narrative in accordance with their ideological and electoral interests. Identity politics, in this case, is not only a tool for mobilization, but also helps to create social boundaries that deepen fragmentation within society.

Thus, Anies Baswedan's role in Islamic politics in Indonesia can be seen as a reflection of the broader dynamics in Indonesia's current democracy. He has the capacity to bridge various political interests and social identities, but also faces major challenges in maintaining an inclusive position amid the pressure of polarization. Identity politics that is not managed wisely risks damaging the social cohesion and integrity of democracy that has been built since the post-reform era. Therefore, it is important for political actors, the media, and society to be more critical and reflective in responding to the construction of identity in the public sphere.

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