The Movement and Political Controversy of the Islamic Defenders Front In Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This study discusses the dynamics of the political movement of the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) as a religious organization that has had a significant influence on the political landscape of post-reform Indonesia. The FPI was founded with the main objectives of upholding amar ma'ruf nahi munkar (enjoining what is good and forbidding what is evil) and carrying out the role of da'wah (proselytizing) in society. However, over time, the FPI has developed into a socio-political force that is actively involved in various national issues, including large demonstrations such as Aksi 212. This study focuses on three main aspects, namely the ideological goals of the FPI, the forms of political movements carried out, and the controversies and state responses to the existence of this organization. The method used is a qualitative approach with case studies, through primary and secondary data analysis. The results of the study show that the FPI is not only a religious-based moral movement, but also a political actor that influences public policy and the electoral process. Although it was legally disbanded at the end of 2020, the FPI's influence remains present in society through new organizations that carry a similar vision. This study is expected to contribute to understanding the relationship between religion, mass organizations, and the state in Indonesia's democratic system.

Keywords: Islamic Defenders Front, political movement, da'wah, action 212, Islamic politics, mass organization.

INTRODUCTION

The Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) is an Islamic civil society organization that was once an important actor in Indonesia's political and social dynamics after the reform era. Founded on August 17, 1998, by Habib Rizieq Shihab and a number of other Islamic figures, the FPI initially emerged as a reaction to social conditions that were

considered increasingly distant from Islamic values. The initial mission of the FPI was to uphold amar ma'ruf nahi munkar, which is to encourage good deeds and prevent evil deeds, especially in the context of urban communities that were considered increasingly liberal after the collapse of the New Order.

However, over time, the FPI's role has expanded beyond moral and religious social issues. The organization has begun to show its involvement in politics, both directly and indirectly. The FPI often organizes mass actions, issues political statements, and has even become part of the opposition to the government at certain moments. One of the peaks of FPI's political involvement was when they mobilized a large crowd in the 212 Action in 2016, which demanded legal proceedings against the then Governor of DKI Jakarta, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok), on charges of blasphemy.

The FPI's involvement in politics has sparked much controversy. On the one hand, they are seen as representing the aspirations of some Muslims who are dissatisfied with the government and the legal system. On the other hand, the FPI is also often criticized for its methods of struggle, which are considered anarchic, intolerant, and contrary to the principles of the rule of law. Many parties believe that their actions are often accompanied by violence, pressure on minority groups, and vigilante justice.

This situation raises an important question in the context of political science studies: how should the role of organizations such as the FPI be positioned in a democratic country? Are they a form of political expression that is legitimate and guaranteed by freedom of association and expression, or do they pose a threat to social stability and the principle of pluralism? The Indonesian government itself eventually disbanded the FPI at the end of 2020, on the grounds that the organization had no legal status and often carried out activities that were against the law.

Through this discussion, the authors wish to examine in greater depth the role, movements, and political controversies surrounding the FPI in Indonesia. This study is important for understanding how religious community organizations can play a significant role in national politics, as well as how the state responds to them within the framework of law and democracy.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter discusses the theoretical basis used to analyze Habib Rizieq's role in the dissolution of the FPI. There are three main theories used, namely charismatic leadership theory, social movement theory, and social identity theory.

a. Max Weber's Charismatic Leadership Theory

Explains how Habib Rizieq gained great influence through his personal charm, powerful rhetoric, and image as a strict cleric. This type of leadership made his followers loyal and ready to follow his directions, including in FPI actions.

b. Social Movement Theory

Divided into two approaches. Resource mobilization theory emphasizes the importance of resources such as networks, funds, and organizations in running a movement. Meanwhile, political process theory looks at how political opportunities and narrative frameworks *(framing)* influence the development of movements such as FPI, especially in the context of political support and pressure.

c. Social Identity Theory

Explains how the FPI shapes collective identity among its members and reinforces the boundaries between us (FPI) and them (the government or other groups). This identity builds internal solidarity and a confrontational attitude towards outsiders.

A combination of these three theories is used to understand the dynamics, strengths, and vulnerabilities of the FPI in the Indonesian socio-political context.

METHODOLOGY

This research uses qualitative methods with a case study approach to examine the political movements and controversies of the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) in Indonesia. In determining the methods for this research, we also obtained many references from several journals and quoted from several news sources. This approach was chosen because the focus of the research was exploratory and did not allow for complete control over the objects being studied.

Data was obtained from two sources: primary data from interviews and observations of relevant parties, and secondary data from literature studies, including scientific articles, books, and relevant online sources. The technique for determining informants used *purposive sampling*, which is the deliberate selection of informants based on their

relevance to the topic. The data were analyzed descriptively and qualitatively to understand the patterns of the FPI's movements, political strategies, and controversies in the Indonesian socio-political context.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) is one of the most controversial Islamic mass organizations in the history of post-reform Indonesian politics. The Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) was founded on August 17, 1998, by Habib Rizieq Shihab and other clerics in response to the post-reform socio-political conditions, which were considered to have lost their moral direction. The main objective of this organization is to uphold the principle of amar ma'ruf nahi munkar in social and state life. On the one hand, the FPI is widely known for its social and religious activities that reach the grassroots level of society. However, on the other hand, this organization is also known for its harsh approach, which is often considered to exceed the limits of the law.

The FPI was born as a reaction to the moral vacuum following the 1998 post-reform era. At that time, Indonesia was experiencing democratic euphoria, but at the same time was in social and political turmoil. Habib Rizieq Shihab, as the central figure behind the founding of the FPI, believed that the unlimited freedom that emerged after the fall of the New Order had caused Islamic values to decline in national life. Thus, the FPI was formed to be a counterbalance to liberal freedom, which was considered to lack moral and religious control.

In the FPI's view, the liberal democratic system had caused a degradation of values by providing freedom without moral control, thus requiring the power of Islam as a counterbalance. Ideologically, the FPI views Islam as not only a personal religion, but also the basis of the social and political system. They encourage the implementation of Islamic law in the realms of law and public policy, although they do not explicitly call for the establishment of an Islamic state. For the FPI, the positive law of the state should not conflict with the values of Islamic law so as not to be considered a violation of Allah's will.

Habib Rizieq emphasized that the FPI's struggle is a form of constitutional jihad within the framework of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia (NKRI). The organization supports Pancasila and the 1945 Constitution, but with a religious

interpretation that positions Islam as the main guide. In various forums, the FPI plays the role of a pressure group that aims to ensure that the government remains aligned with the interests of Muslims and rejects policies that are considered secular or liberal.

a. The FPI's Political Movement

The FPI's political movement reflects the dynamics between religious preaching and socio-political action that is reactive to government policies. Although it does not have a formal structure like a political party, the FPI utilizes its flexibility to act more quickly and responsively to issues that are strategic to Muslims. In this context, the FPI uses a social movement approach based on cultural and community networks, which makes them relevant at the grassroots level.

The FPI's role as *a pressure group* is also demonstrated through their consistency in voicing issues of public morality. Instead of channeling their aspirations through legislative channels, the FPI prefers a direct approach by bringing masses into the public sphere. This strategy not only demonstrates the strength of their masses, but also serves as a form of social control over policies that are considered deviant from Islamic values.

The FPI's political movement is not carried out through formal party channels, but through non-electoral activities such as demonstrations, moral advocacy, and mobilization of public opinion. The FPI often takes to the streets in the form of peaceful actions and fierce protests to oppose government policies that are considered contrary to Islamic values. Their actions are usually supported by religious narratives and strong Islamic symbols to attract the sympathy of the Muslim masses.

The FPI also establishes informal relationships with ideologically aligned political parties, such as the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) or the National Mandate Party (PAN) during certain political moments . These relationships are pragmatic and contextual, especially during political moments such as regional elections or legislative elections. They not only act as tactical partners, but also as the voice of the people outside parliament. Through lectures, social media, and mosque networks, the FPI consistently monitors religious issues such as the anti-pornography bill, sharia regulations, and opposition to the legalization of LGBT rights.

In addition to political action, the FPI also builds social infrastructure through organizational wings such as the Islamic Defenders Front (LPI) and the Indonesian Red Crescent (HILMI). These units are used for humanitarian and disaster response activities, which also serve as a basis for legitimacy in the community. The combination of mass movements and social services strengthens the FPI's position as an Islamic socio-political actor with significant influence in various regions of Indonesia.

b. Controversy and Case Study: Action 212

Throughout its existence, the FPI has often been involved in various controversies due to its approach, which is considered confrontational and beyond the limits of legal authority. They often conduct *raids* on nightclubs, bars, or cafes that are considered immoral, often without official permission, which leads to clashes with the authorities or residents. This vigilante approach has led to widespread criticism of the FPI by human rights activists, academics, and pluralists, who consider it to be undermining the rule of law.

One major case study is the Monas Incident on June 1, 2008. In this incident, FPI mobs attacked demonstrators from the National Alliance for Freedom of Religion and Belief (AKKBB) who were voicing tolerance and protection for minority groups. The clash resulted in dozens of injuries and led to the arrest of dozens of FPI members. This incident marked the beginning of the FPI being labeled as an intolerant and repressive organization.

However, the peak of FPI's involvement in national dynamics occurred during the 411 and 212 Islamic Defenders' Actions in 2016. These actions were triggered by statements made by Jakarta Governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok), which were deemed blasphemous because they quoted Al-Ma'idah verse 51 in a political context. The FPI became the main actor in mobilizing the masses to demand legal proceedings against Ahok. This action put enormous pressure on the government and the judicial system , which ultimately found Ahok guilty and sentenced him to two years in prison. This event strengthened the FPI's position as the largest political Islamic force after the reform era.

The 212 Action phenomenon became an important turning point in the history of the FPI movement because it succeeded in positioning them as central actors in the national

political arena. This action was not merely a religious demonstration, but had turned into a tool for political mobilization based on religious identity. The success of this action was inseparable from the FPI's ability to utilize digital media and religious rhetoric that touched the collective emotions of the people.

However, the actions led by the FPI have also drawn criticism from various circles for being exclusive and divisive. *Sweeping* actions and violence against minority groups are evidence that the FPI's approach often falls outside the framework of the law. This raises a dilemma between freedom of expression and the protection of diversity in a democratic country.

The controversy surrounding the FPI reveals a tug-of-war between the moral demands of society and the supremacy of state law. In this context, the FPI is a clear example of how a social movement can play a dual role: as the moral guardian of the people and as a challenge to the formal legal system.

c. Involvement in Practical Politics

Although not a political party, the FPI plays an active role in electoral politics, especially at the local and national levels. In the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election, they supported the Anies Baswedan and Sandiaga Uno ticket by forming an alliance based on mosques and religious communities. This support was carried out systematically through religious lectures, social media campaigns, and mass mobilization in the field.

The FPI not only provided moral support, but also strategy and logistics, including campaign security and image building for candidates. This involvement shows that the FPI has managerial and political strategy capabilities that are no less than those of official political parties. Their activities prove that religious-based political forces can significantly influence election results.

In addition to regional elections, the FPI is also active in monitoring legislative policies and supporting certain legislative candidates. They rally support from the masses through Islamic boarding schools, religious lectures, and digital media. This political direction shows that the FPI does not only focus on street actions but also utilizes electoral momentum as a strategy for ideological struggle.

The FPI's involvement in electoral politics reinforces their shift from being merely a religious organization to becoming an informal political actor. In the 2017 Jakarta regional elections, they did not only show passive support, but were actively involved in political communication design, vote gathering, and even field strategies. This support shows that the FPI understands the importance of political power as an instrument of da'wah and sharia advocacy.

Furthermore, their involvement in elections also shows their efforts at political regeneration through the figures they support. This is a form of expanding their influence from the social sphere to the policy sphere. This is interesting because even though it is not a party, the FPI has carried out the function of political representation of Muslims outside the formal channels.

However, the FPI's orientation in practical politics tends to be opportunistic. They support candidates who are considered ideologically aligned, but do not establish long-term commitments. This can be a strength because it maintains flexibility, but it is also a weakness because it lacks a consistent direction of struggle within the formal power structure.

d. The Relationship between the FPI and the State

The FPI's relationship with the state is often marked by tension and conflict. Although the FPI formally supports the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia and Pancasila, they often criticize government policies that are considered liberal, pro-Western, or detrimental to Muslims. This criticism is expressed openly through lectures, social media, and protests that sometimes lead to violence.

During certain periods, the government has been permissive towards the FPI for political reasons. However, with increasing public pressure and the growth of intolerance, the state has begun to take a repressive stance towards the FPI's activities. The National Police ( ) often disperses their demonstrations, detains FPI members, and restricts their movement in the media.

Tensions peaked after the shooting of six FPI members at KM 50 of the Jakarta-Cikampek Toll Road in December 2020. This incident sparked condemnation and solidarity among FPI supporters, while also providing the government with a reason to

evaluate their existence. The relationship between the FPI and the state reached a crisis point, culminating in the official dissolution of the organization.

e. Resolution and Dissolution of the FPI

On December 30, 2020, the Indonesian government issued a Joint Decree (SKB) from six ministries or institutions stating that the FPI was a banned organization. The SKB stated that the FPI had lost its legality in 2019 because it did not renew its Registered Certificate (SKT). In addition, a number of FPI members were suspected of being involved in violations of the law and activities that threatened public order.

The decision to dissolve FPI was also influenced by the shooting of six FPI militia members by authorities on the Jakarta-Cikampek Toll Road. The incident led to public and media pressure on the government to take stronger action against religious organizations considered radical. The government assessed that the existence of FPI could disrupt national stability and was not in line with the spirit of democracy and diversity.

Although the FPI was legally disbanded, its influence is still felt in society. Several FPI figures then formed a new organization called the Islamic Brotherhood Front (FPI), which claims to continue the struggle with a more legal and moderate approach. This phenomenon shows that administrative dissolution does not necessarily stop socio-ideological movements that are already deeply rooted in society.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) has transformed from a moral advocacy organization into an active socio-political actor in various national dynamics. Initially established with the aim of upholding amar ma'ruf nahi munkar (enjoining what is good and forbidding what is evil), the FPI grew stronger by utilizing mass actions and religious social networks to influence public opinion, policy, and even electoral results. Although the FPI is not a political party, its involvement in regional elections, the 212 action, and public policy advocacy indicates a complex political role. However, the FPI's aggressive approach, which often crossed legal boundaries, sparked much controversy and criticism, especially regarding acts of violence and discrimination. The FPI's relationship with the state was also dynamic sometimes

accommodative, sometimes repressive until it finally collapsed in 2020. Although legally inactive, the FPI's ideology and influence live on through new organizations and social networks that had been established previously. Thus, this study highlights the importance of understanding the communication between religion, mass organizations, and the state in the context of Indonesian democracy, as well as the challenges faced in maintaining a balance between freedom of association and socio-political stability.

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