



The Alumni 212 Rally: An Indicator of Changing Tide for Islam in Indonesia?

Table of Contents

- ▶ Introduction 1
- ▶ The December 212 Alumni Rally: Why is it so relevant?... 2
- ▶ Islam and Indonesia: Does this augur a period of tumult for the promising Southeast Asian nation?..... 5

Introduction

For a nation characterised by the values of pluralism, multiculturalism and moderate religious values encompassed in a secular ideology, cultural trends in contemporary Indonesia points toward an inclination for a conservative form of Islamic values. This affinity toward a rigid form of the religion in a country with the world's largest Muslim population, coupled with the demographics supporting such an inclination, underscores the paradigm shift that, in effect, is likely to change the political climate of the country. In such a scenario, it is germane to comprehend the reasons behind this shift, particularly as the country will potentially be one of the drivers of the Southeast Asian economy in the coming years. The following report analyses the catalyst behind the said shift in the fundamental values of the Indonesian politico-cultural society, and if the growing significance of Islam is likely to hinder the economic success story of a country with promising demographics.

The election of incumbent President Joko Widodo, popularly referred to as Jokowi, in 2014 pointed toward the Indonesian population's proclivity for a leader who promised growth and development, especially for a young democracy that had seen years of military rule that also was characterised by widespread corruption and sycophancy. Recent polls have suggested that over 60 percent of the Indonesian populace still favour Jokowi over potential rival and runner-up during the 2014 general elections, Prabowo Subianto. However, one of the major issues of concern with regard to the impending 2019 general elections has been Jokowi's secular stance and reiteration of the country's plural, secular values relative to the rising popularity for hardline Muslim groups such as the Islamic Defenders' Front (FPI).

While Nationalism across the world has been characterised by a relative leaning toward a right-wing, anti-Islam ideology, Indonesian nationalism has assumed the idea of identity politics, wherein anti-Chinese sentiments and economic nationalism remain the primary actors in the country's political chessboard. With hardline Islamic groups such as the FPI and the now-banned Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) being the torchbearer for these values of the Indonesian Islamic identity, the local populace has indicated its support for these groups by being a part of mass protests organised by these organisations. In that sense, it is necessary to understand the significance of the "Alumni 212 rally" that may just be the political watershed and an indicator of the said shift in Indonesia's politico-cultural society.

The December 212 Alumni Rally: Why is it so relevant?

On December 2, 2016, thousands of supporters of various hardline Islamic groups, including the FPI, HTI, rallied in central Jakarta to demand the prosecution of former governor of Jakarta, Basuki “Ahok” Tjahaja Purnama for alleged blasphemy against Islam. The rallies, which were initially relatively smaller in size, garnered mass participation on December 2 making it potentially the largest single religious gathering in the country’s history. Ahok, an Indonesian-Chinese and Christian leader, was until then a front-runner to win Jakarta’s gubernatorial elections, especially due to his development agenda and success in transforming Jakarta into a world-class city that set it at par with other southeast Asian sister cities such as Kuala Lumpur. So, what changed overnight for such a populist leader to be convicted and subsequently jailed? Why is this event in Indonesian politics still relevant after a year that it may indicate future trends in the country’s politics?

One of the most significant aspects of the Indonesian growth story has been the perception of unequal societal growth. A perception that has been reiterated with a relatively high Gini coefficient, the measure of income or wealth distribution in a country, of 0.39 for Indonesia. The common pattern has been observed to be that of the country’s low-income bracket encompassing the young Muslim population of the country, while the richest and top-income bracket being held by the country’s ethnic Chinese population.

This aforesaid perception of inequality is thriving at a time when approximately half of Indonesia’s population is below the age of 30 and around 37 percent is below 20 years of age. The most important concern for this demographic is employment and corresponding material success. While juxtaposing these numbers with the fact that over 80 percent of the country’s 260 million people are followers of Sunni Islam, it gives space for the Islamic political groups of the country to exploit the issue of identity and religious nationalism.

For a young demographic that is driven toward success, security in the form of a religious identity likely holds significant appeal. This is especially relevant at a time when globalisation has become increasingly stagnant with countries’ engaging in populist protectionist politics. This period also coincides with thriving nationalism across countries of the world, thus paving the way for mass support for the country’s hardline Islamist groups such as the FPI at this time.

Indonesian Population by Sex and Age Group

	% of total population	Male (absolute)	Female (absolute)
0-14 years	27.3	34,165,213	32,978,841
15-64 years	66.5	82,104,636	81,263,055
65 years and over	6.1	6,654,695	8,446,603

Source: CIA World Factbook

Twenty percent of over 4,200 Muslim students across Indonesia's universities and high schools advocated the establishment of an Islamic Caliphate, according to a survey conducted by a Jakarta-based organisation in November. Additionally, one in four students reportedly expressed their readiness to wage Jihad to achieve the goal of establishing a Caliphate. The country also houses the Aceh province, a state which conspicuously follows the Sharia law - rigid norms governing the populace based on fundamentals of Islam. The FPI has popularly in the past called for the implementation of the Sharia law in the country, with only Muslim leaders being allowed to hold governing positions.

With the country's young populace being drawn toward the conservative values of Islam, religious identity is likely to be a significant factor that may be the deciding catalyst in the 2019 elections. This assessment assumes further credence against the backdrop of Ahok's significant loss during the gubernatorial elections in Jakarta, that was famously seen as politics of religion trumping a leader's development agenda. In that sense, it is extremely significant to understand the event that is the Alumni 212 rally independently, and its likely potential to be the symbol of shifting political trends in a country that carries with it the promise of a young demography, vast natural resources and affinity for change in contemporary times.

Composition of Indonesia's Six Official Religions

	Percentage share (of total population)	Absolute numbers (in millions)
Muslim	87.2	207.2
Protestant	6.9	16.5
Catholic	2.9	6.9
Hindu	1.7	4.0
Buddhist	0.7	1.7
Confucian	0.05	0.1

Source: Statistics Indonesia (Badan Pusat Statistik), Population Census 2010

Islam and Indonesia: Does this augur a period of tumult for the promising Southeast Asian nation?

Ideological shifts have been significant for comprehending Indonesian political history. Beginning with a regime and leadership that showcased a penchant for communist values, much to the ire of the country's military and Islamist leaders, the country witnessed a Junta regime for over three decades that became characterised by unrestrained corruption. Keeping in mind the failure of past ideological shifts, coupled with the common fabric of Islamic identity, the idea of Islam is likely perceived by majority of the population to be the binding factor for the Indonesian nation. However, the question remains as to if the shift to a very conservative, extreme idea of Islam and an underlying threat to the country's secular values is likely to be perceived as a positive indicator by the international community. This is especially relevant when understanding the investors' mindset, at a time when the southeast Asian nation does need foreign investments to develop its infrastructural base.

Furthermore, the political shifts in the country also coincides with the appeal that transnational Islamic militant groups hold, especially for disenfranchised youth of the country. In that sense, a political climate that promotes hardline Islamic values is liable to be a measure that is equivalent to leaving the country's population exposed to being drawn into the clutches of radicalisation. The scheduled rally on December 2, 2017 is expected to be attended by FPI leader Rizieq Shihab, who has been on a self-imposed exile in Saudi Arabia. Reports also suggest that incumbent Jakarta Governor Anies Baswedan has been invited to the event; however, it remains unlikely if the recently-elected Governor would affiliate himself ostensibly with a largely religious gathering that refer to themselves as the 'Defenders of Islam'. With that being said, given precedence regarding these religious rallies having the potential to mobilise thousands of Indonesians based on a common platform, the December 2 rally is liable to feature tens of thousands of Indonesians expressing their support for the idea of Islam that has been promoted by FPI and its affiliate Islamic groups.



Former Jakarta Governor 'Ahok' being led to trial on blasphemy charges

A threat to religious and ethnic minorities in the country can be seen as an indicator of inadequacy of the political leadership to secure the country's population and values, thus undermining the confidence of the international community with regard to the country's political stability. Keeping that in mind, although the December 2 rally may likely be a watershed in comprehending the role of Islam in Indonesian politics, it is significant to understand the country's political climate beyond the event.

One of the pivotal initiatives by incumbent President Jokowi has been his attempt to address and attend gatherings seen to be secular and promoting the country's fundamental values of Pancasila and secularism. Furthermore, the attempt to infuse the country's educational establishment with teachers and proponents of moderate Islam, as well as the rejuvenated emphasis on the country's fundamental values of pluralism is likely an attempt to stem the challenge at the grassroots itself, thus sustaining a relatively tolerant social fabric. However, one of the most significant factors for the political establishment to address remains to be the idea of economic inequality. The litmus test for the incumbent government will remain to be its attempt to uplift the country's low-income young Muslim population, which, in turn, is likely to neutralise the significance of Islamic groups such as the FPI.

C 1003, ONE BKC, G BLOCK
BANDRA-KURLA COMPLEX
BANDRA (EAST)
MUMBAI-400051
INDIA

T: +912262364401

E: connectingminds@grid91.com

W: www.grid91.com

