

**INDONESIAN ISLAMISTS  
IN THE LEAD-UP TO THE 2024 ELECTIONS**

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Islamist organisations in Indonesia are unlikely to have any significant impact on the 2024 elections, and the 2019 violence by Islamist supporters of defeated presidential candidate Prabowo Subianto is not likely to be repeated. One reason is that the four main Islamist groups backing Prabowo in 2019 – Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), Wahdah Islamiyah, Arrahman Qur’anic Learning (AQL), and Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) – are no longer united. There is no one who stands out as the political enemy as Jokowi did in 2019. The groups also have either been banned, weakened or deterred from active engagement in politics by an anti-radical campaign launched by President Jokowi as a response to the mass mobilisation they led against the then governor of Jakarta, popularly known as Ahok, in 2016-2017. The campaign, at least in the short term, has worked. Finally, Prabowo himself, again a leading candidate for president, has abandoned the Islamists as he has concentrated on wooing Jokowi’s pluralist base, dominated by the moderate Muslim organisation Nahdlatul Ulama (NU).

Three men have declared themselves candidates for president in 2024 (Jokowi cannot run for a third term under Indonesian law). In addition to Prabowo, Ganjar Pranowo, the former governor of Central Java, is running as the standard-bearer of Partai Demokrat Indonesia Perjuangan (PDIP), the party that backed Jokowi and that Islamists see as the home of liberals, leftists, and non-Muslims. Anies Baswedan, who used Islamist support to help defeat Ahok to become governor of Jakarta in 2017, is coming in a distant third in opinion polls. As of October 2023, Islamists were leaning toward Anies, but with the knowledge that he could be eliminated in the first round. If that happens, as many predict, then Islamists could support Prabowo, but with little enthusiasm, especially if he takes Jokowi’s son as his running mate. And if he loses again, the Islamists will be unlikely to rally to his defence with violence in the streets, especially as the polarisation, so evident in the aftermath of the anti-Ahok campaign, has been largely absent in the lead-up to 2024.

Even if they were united, Islamist groups do not have the strength, influence or inclination to affect the 2024 election at a national level. FPI and HTI are both banned, and while both are still active, overall support for FPI has declined, and HTI has shown little interest in the elections. The Salafi-modernist groups, Wahdah Islamiyah and AQL, are lying low and keeping their focus on religious proselytisation and education. None of this means that Islamists are a spent force, but for 2024, they are unlikely to be exploited by the candidates for pre-election support or post-election disruption. They themselves remain committed to support officials who will be tolerant of Islamist views and activities, but in 2024 that support is more likely to be passive than active. Whether they regain unity and strength to move back into a more active mode will depend on political and economic factors outside the scope of this report.

The report examines developments in the Islamist community as the elections approach, and the factors that are shaping their respective strategies and candidate choices. It is based on interviews and participant observation with Islamist leaders and supporters in Greater

Jakarta, Central Java and South Sulawesi from 2022 to July 2023. Follow-up online interviews and social media observation were conducted to cover developments as of mid-October 2023.

## II. BACKGROUND

The Islamist alliance that joined Prabowo in 2019 originated in the 2016 mobilisation against Jakarta governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, better known as Ahok, whom Islamists accused of blasphemy.<sup>1</sup> With over 750,000 people joining in, the largest rally on 2 December 2016 (hence the designation of the campaign as the “212 Movement”) involved the entire spectrum of Indonesian Muslims, including elements from Indonesia’s two largest mainstream Muslim organisations, NU and Muhammadiyah. The coordinating body for the rally, the National Movement to Safeguard the Fatwa of Ulama (GNPF-U or GNPF), consisted of two main components: the Salafi-modernists, represented by Wahdah Islamiyah and AQL, and conservative traditionalists.<sup>2</sup> AQL’s founder Bachtiar Nasir served as GNPF chairman with Wahdah leader Zaitun Rasmin as his deputy. The conservative traditionalists were headed by FPI but also included its close partners such as Forum Umat Islam (FUI) and the various “God remembrance councils” (*majelis dzikir*) founded by Betawi and Hadhrami clerics. FPI’s Rizieq Shihab served as GNPF adviser and “Grand Imam” (Imam Besar), while FPI Secretary-General Munarman, was named GNPF Commander. HTI never formally entered the GNPF coalition but went all out in mobilising its mass base to attend the rallies.

Government retaliation came swiftly after Ahok, known as a Jokowi ally, was convicted of blasphemy. The Jokowi government, taken aback by the size of the rallies, suddenly saw Islamism as an existential threat to the state and moved to take legal action against leading organisations and individuals. HTI was the first to be banned, in May 2017, through an Emergency Decree in lieu of Legislation (Perpu No.2 2017) which became the 2017 Law on Mass Organisations.<sup>3</sup> Bachtiar Nasir was accused of financing terrorism, while FUI leader Al-Khaththath was thrown into jail on rebellion allegations. Rizieq fled to Saudi Arabia to avoid the various charges brought against him.<sup>4</sup>

In 2019, Jokowi officially launched the anti-radicalisation campaign. Among other things, the police placed individuals suspected of supporting “radical” Islamist groups, including

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<sup>1</sup> For background on the anti-Ahok mobilisation and its aftermath, see IPAC, “After Ahok: The Islamist Agenda in Indonesia”, Report No. 44, 6 April 2018; IPAC, “Anti-Ahok to Anti-Jokowi: Islamist Influence on Indonesia’s 2019 Election Campaign”, Report No. 55, 15 March 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Wahdah Islamiyah and AQL are described here as “Salafi-modernists” because their founders drew inspiration from the Islamic modernism of Muhammadiyah, the contemporary Salafism of Saudi Arabia and the political ideals of the Muslim Brotherhood. Salafism is a global Islamic movement that aims to return Islam to its purest form as practiced by the Prophet Muhammad and his contemporaries (*salaf al-salih*). Despite the rise of Salafism and other new religious movements, the two largest streams of Islam are “traditionalism”, as represented by Nahdlatul Ulama, and “modernism”. Traditionalists typically follow the Shafi’i school of law (*madzhab*) and the Ash’ari school of theology, whereas modernists reject blind submission to any particular school. FPI’s religious practices and creed are closer to NU’s traditionalism but politically more conservative than NU, as FPI demands shari’a implementation – hence “conservative traditionalist” as opposed to just traditionalist.

<sup>3</sup> Peraturan Pemerintah Pengganti Undang-Undang (Perpu) No.2 Tahun 2017, “Perubahan atas Undang-Undang No.17 Tahun 2013 tentang Organisasi Kemasyarakatan”, 10 July 2017, <https://peraturan.bpk.go.id/Details/53279/perpu-no-2-tahun-2017>.

<sup>4</sup> IPAC, “Anti-Ahok to Anti-Jokowi,” p. 2.

civil servants, teachers and university lecturers, under surveillance and encouraged colleagues to report them through anonymous channels.<sup>5</sup> The campaign picked up after Rizieq's homecoming in November 2020, when he returned home to the cheers of 50,000 fans who swarmed into the airport to welcome him.

On 6 December 2020, police attempted to arrest Rizieq for his alleged breach of the Covid health quarantine through the mass rallies that greeted his return. As he tried to escape, six of his bodyguards were shot in a deadly car chase with police intelligence agents on Kilometer 50 of the Cikampek Toll Road just outside Bogor.<sup>6</sup> Police initially denied any wrongdoing, but investigations by the National Human Rights Commission ruled four of the six shootings unlawful.<sup>7</sup> While FPI was still mourning its "six martyrs", the government formally disbanded it on 30 December 2020.<sup>8</sup>

Rizieq was finally arrested on 12 December and convicted six months later, while FPI Secretary-General Munarman was arrested in April 2021 and later sentenced to three years on the basis of flimsy evidence for supporting the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS).<sup>9</sup>

If the crackdown on Islamists was one half of Jokowi's anti-radicalisation campaign, the other half consisted of promoting religious moderation by totally embracing NU at the expense of other Muslim organisations, including Muhammadiyah. Jokowi championed NU's concept of "Islam Nusantara" (Archipelagic Islam), premised on the full compatibility of Islam and Indonesian nationalism, and funded and facilitated its global promotion. The driving force of Islam Nusantara, Yahya Cholil Staquf (known as Gus Yahya), became NU chairman in December 2021 and, backed by Jokowi, went on to host the R20 Interfaith Forum as part of the G20 Summit in Bali in November 2022.<sup>10</sup> Yahya's brother, Yaquut Cholil Qoumas, was named Minister of Religious Affairs in December 2020. His flagship program has been the production of curricula, books and other materials on religious moderation to be implemented simultaneously in schools, universities, government agencies and communities. The state's patronage of NU combined with the crackdown and political exclusion of Islamist groups generated deep resentment not only among Islamists but also within Muhammadiyah and other modernist Muslim communities who had overwhelmingly voted for Prabowo in 2019.

The Islamist groups responded to the anti-radical campaign in different ways, all of which laid the groundwork for their approach to the 2024 elections.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 8. See also Tempo documentary "Kilometer 50", <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KzLIIDyAX9U>

<sup>7</sup> "Sidang Unlawful Killing Laskar FPI, Saksi Komnas HAM Beberkan Proses Penyelidikan," Kompas.com, 30 November 2021.

<sup>8</sup> IPAC, "The Crackdown on Islamist 'Radicals' in Indonesia," Report No. 71, 25 May 2021, pp. 11-13. For the full text of the joint ministerial decree banning FPI, see <https://media.suara.com/files/2020/12/30/17478-skb-pembubaran-fpi.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> Rizieq, arrested on 12 December 2020, was sentenced on 24 June 2021 to four years in prison for violating health protocols, spreading false information and faking a health test. He was conditionally released on 20 July 2022.

<sup>10</sup> Syafiq Hasyim, "Prospects and Weaknesses of the R20 Forum on Religion Launched at the G20 Summit in Bali," *ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute Perspective*, Issue 2023, No. 26, 12 April 2023.

### III. FPI'S RESPONSE

A day after it was banned in December 2020, FPI declared the establishment of a new organisation called the Islamic Brotherhood Front (Front Persaudaraan Islam, still abbreviated FPI). Such a bold move was, however, more symbolic than substantive. In reality, Rizieq instructed rank and file members to “take three steps backward, otherwise we will all be criminalised.”<sup>11</sup>

This meant, at least for the moment, abandoning the paramilitary tactics for which FPI had become known: raiding places of vice (brothels and casinos, except those owned by the police); closing down restaurants that stayed open during Ramadhan; attacking mosques of Muslim sects considered ‘deviant’ or apostate, such as Ahmadiyah; and trying to forcibly close “unauthorised” churches. FPI also rewrote its Memorandum and Articles of Association (AD/ART) to cleanse itself of any association with Islamist radicalism by removing the word *khilafah* (caliphate) and reaffirming its traditionalist roots. Article 6 in the 2021 charter confirms its commitment to the Ash’ari school of theology and Shafi’i jurisprudence – not dissimilar to the moderate Nahdlatul Ulama.<sup>12</sup>

The disbandment accelerated leadership regeneration within FPI. As Rizieq does not have any sons of his own, the group attempted to reproduce his charisma through two of his sons-in-law: Habib Hanif bin Abdurrahman Alatas and Habib Muhammad bin Husein Alatas. Hanif particularly won over the hearts of his father-in-law’s followers as well as his own younger cohort. Born in 1992, Hanif boasts a Ba’alawi lineage, solid educational pedigree and oratory skills.<sup>13</sup> He attended Pesantren Darullughah Wadda’wah (Dalwa) in Bangil, East Java, a prestigious school preferred by many young *habaib* and blue-blooded traditionalists alike.<sup>14</sup> He went on to Al-Ahghaff University in Yemen, the centre of Ba’alawi religious education.

Hanif was arrested at the same time as his father-in-law but only sentenced to a year in prison for aiding in Rizieq’s false Covid test. While he was briefly detained, it was the second son-in-law, Muhammad, who was appointed chairman of the new FPI at its first national congress in March 2022.<sup>15</sup> Muhammad lacked Hanif’s ability to charm, but he was also a Yemen graduate. Meanwhile the new FPI secretary replacing Munarman was a young Ba’alawi lawyer Habib Ali bin Abu Bakar Alatas who grew up in Petamburan, where FPI’s headquarters is located. The Advisory Council is headed by KH Qurthubi Jaelani, an influential cleric whose Pesantren Al-Futuhiyah in Banten has 5,000 students and several thousand more alumni.<sup>16</sup> His pesantren was responsible for the massive turnout of Bantenese traditionalists in the 2016 Islamist mobilisation.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with FPI activists in South Jakarta, 24 December 2022.

<sup>12</sup> “Anggaran Dasar Front Persaudaraan Islam (FPI),” faktakini.info, 5 September 2021.

<sup>13</sup> Ba’alawi refers to so-called blood descendants of Prophet Muhammad originating from Hadhramaut, Yemen.

<sup>14</sup> Note that Pesantren Dalwa sent busloads of *santri* to join the anti-Ahok rallies.

<sup>15</sup> “Munas ke-1 Front Persaudaraan Islam (FPI),” faktakini.info, 17 March 2022.

<sup>16</sup> Qurthubi had known Rizieq since early 2000s. He did not formally join FPI, however, until 2014 because he wanted to clarify Rizieq’s theological views, due to rumours of his Shi’a and Wahhabi inclinations. See “Sejarah Buya Qurtuby Jaelani Masuk FPI”, Front TV reposted by Jadwal Majelis Kota Tangerang, 2 July 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d-2P3w16RpY>

Together, Qurthubi and the younger *habaib* represent a new generation of intellectually inclined FPI elites that seek to transform FPI by strengthening its religious sense of community (*jama'ah*) over its paramilitary activities (*laskar*). They imposed mandatory religious study sessions on all FPI branches and required that branch heads be able to comprehend classical Arabic texts or “yellow books” (*kitab kuning*).<sup>17</sup>

The new FPI set a target to re-establish its regional structures in all 38 provinces and in most regencies/cities (*kabupaten/kota*) by November 2023, purposefully timing it for the 2024 election campaign. This proved to be a difficult task. As of September 2023, FPI had only managed to form branches in 23 provinces and half of the regencies. It strategically targeted the most populous – hence electorally significant – regions including all five provinces on Java as well as North Sumatra, South Sulawesi, Lampung, South Sumatra and Riau.<sup>18</sup>

FPI's efforts have faced many challenges, including financial difficulties, local leadership conflicts and the meddling of state security agencies. The sources of internal conflict vary, though it typically involves contestation between leading figures with mobilising skills/resources vs those with religious/Hadhrami credentials. In Depok, West Java, a physical brawl almost erupted between the followers of two contending leaders: a gangster (*jawara*) who had led the Depok branch before the government ban versus a young religious teacher (*ustadz*) whose family owned a big pesantren.<sup>19</sup> FPI headquarters intervened and selected the *ustadz* because he passed the Arabic test, though other members believed it was more because his father was a respected cleric with a loyal mass base.

In some cases, local police and intelligence agencies reportedly exploited these rivalries to slow down FPI's recovery. In South Sulawesi, for example, a deadlock occurred as a result of two contending factions: a non-Hadhrami faction led by a wealthy *ustadz* and a Hadhrami faction that had fewer material resources but was backed by “repentant gangsters” with excellent mobilising skills. The ex-gangsters were skilled at negotiating with police, which enabled them to continue their anti-vice activities. The FPI headquarters ended up approving the Hadhrami faction in part due to the familial connections but also to its proven competence in mass mobilisation. The non-Hadhrami faction accused its rivals of being police agents planted to sow discord within FPI.<sup>20</sup> The newly anointed head of FPI South Sulawesi, a man of Hadhrami descent, contended that maintaining communication with security agencies was not a matter of choice but a price they had to pay in order to live another day.<sup>21</sup>

FPI is acutely aware of the importance of protests and media visibility to maintain its relevance. Beginning in March 2022, FPI, together with the Brotherhood of the 212 Alumni (PA 212), organised a series of protests against the Minister of Religious Affairs whom they

<sup>17</sup> Interview with FPI *ustadz*, Jakarta, 13 June 2023.

<sup>18</sup> “Sambutan Abuya KH Qurthubi dalam Maulid Akbar Nabi Muhammad Bersama DPP FPI”, Islamic Brotherhood Television, 27 September 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kqfz9l0HbL8>

<sup>19</sup> Interview with FPI activists, South Jakarta, 26 July 2023.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with a former leader of FPI Makassar, 21 July 2023.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with a top figure of FPI South Sulawesi, 23 July 2023.

accused of making blasphemous remarks about the call to prayer (*adzan*).<sup>22</sup> The so-called “Three-Pillar” alliance of FPI, PA 212 and GPNF organised a number of rallies, including a protest against the Indian government’s treatment of Muslims at the Indian Embassy in June 2022, protests against the removal of the government fuel subsidy in September 2022, and rallies to demand the closure of a large pesantren, Al-Zaytun, seen as headed by a ‘heretical’ cult leader in June 2023. They also issued threats which led to the cancellation of a LGBT event in Jakarta in July 2023.<sup>23</sup>

In September 2023, FPI was involved in urging the public to reject the forced eviction of a Malay-Muslim community in Rempang, Riau Islands, for a China-linked mega development project.<sup>24</sup> FPI’s agitation has grown more vocal and daring since Rizieq was released on probation in June 2022. When Rizieq made his first post-release public appearance at the 212 Reunion rally in December 2022, his statement was calm and measured, focusing on prayers for the nation and Muslim citizens in particular. But in a video that went viral in late September, Rizieq went on the warpath against government actions in Rempang, singling out powerful Chinese-Indonesian tycoon Tomy Winata in his diatribe:

In 1780, when the Dutch invaded Rempang, it was [the Malay Muslim people] who fought against the Dutch and won. And now their grandchildren are being evicted, their land has been sold to someone called Tomy Winata. Who is he, brothers? Just because he owns lots of money and wealth, he thinks he can act like a master and buy off all government officials to crush the people? How crass (*kurang ajar*)! I warn all the dragons [ethnic Chinese tycoons], watch your behaviour, don’t disturb the *pribumi* [literally natives, but here used in the sense local Muslims], don’t harass the Muslim people! If you keep harassing the Muslim people, tomorrow you’ll turn into worms, dragons no more!<sup>25</sup>

The eruption of a major crisis in which inequality and ethnoreligious themes overlap is exactly the kind of galvanising issue that FPI had been expecting (and wanting) since 2017 when the anti-Ahok campaign ended. The political landscape had changed dramatically since then, however as political polarisation had eased and state repression of Islamism had become more effective in pre-empting large-scale mobilisation. Moreover, FPI was not the only organisation criticising the Rempang operation – NU did so as well.<sup>26</sup> Rizieq’s crude effort at

<sup>22</sup> “Massa PA 212 Demo Mabes Polri Desak Menag Yaquq Ditangkap,” *cnnindonesia.com*, 15 March 2022. Yaquq came under criticism for comparing the exceedingly loud sound of *adzan* to dogs barking. At the time, he had just issued a circular letter to regulate the maximum volume of sound system for *adzan* which is known to cause noise pollution. He asked the Muslim people to understand the feelings of non-Muslims surrounded by several mosques in their neighbourhood: “Imagine if you lived in a residential complex and all your neighbours owned pet dogs which barked simultaneously [five times a day], wouldn’t you feel disturbed?”

<sup>23</sup> “FPI-PA 212 Demo di Kedubes India, Minta Sang Dubes Diusir dari Indonesia,” *jpnn.com*, 17 June 2022; “PA 212 hingga FPI Demo Tolak Kenaikan BBM Naik Hari Ini,” *katadata.co.id*, 12 September 2022; ‘Hari Ini, FPI Gelar Aksi 266 Tuntut Bubarkan Ponpes Al-Zaytun,’ *okezone.com*, 26 June 2023; “LGBT Event in Indonesia Scrapped after Security Threats,” *reuters.com*, 12 July 2023.

<sup>24</sup> “Massa FPI-PA 212 Gelar Aksi 209 Bela Rempang di Patung Kuda Jakpus,” *detik.com*, 20 September 2023. More on the Rempang crisis, see Desy Sagita, “‘Save Our Village’: Rempang Residents Resist Eviction for China-backed Project,” *thejakartapost.com*, 5 October 2023.

<sup>25</sup> “(Video) Terkait Rempang, Ini Peringatan Keras Habib Rizieq kepada Tommy Winata,” *faktakini.info*, 18 September 2023.

<sup>26</sup> “Ini Pernyataan Lengkap PBNU tentang Persoalan Pulau Rempang,” *nu.or.id*, 15 September 2023.

incitement thus had little impact, either in affecting the Rempang plans or suggesting that he was a political force to be reckoned with as 2024 approached.

The escalation of the Gaza war in October 2023 provided new opportunities for mobilisation, but as of this writing, it was too early to tell how this would affect FPI.

## IV. THE SALAFI-MODERNIST RESPONSE

Jokowi's anti-radical campaign dealt a heavy blow to Wahdah Islamiyah and AQL, both to their resources and their ability to recruit Muslim professionals in government agencies and state-owned enterprises (SOEs). As a result, Wahdah almost completely abandoned its critical stance and pursued friendly relations with both the government and NU, while AQL successfully secured alternative resources from new sympathisers at home and abroad. Both have emerged stronger than they were before state repression began, and both are intent on leveraging their growing human capital to try from behind the scenes to influence the elections without resorting to mass mobilisation. The only mass mobilisations initiated by Salafi-modernists in 2023 have been pro-Palestine rallies. They believe, correctly, that the government tends to be less bothered by Islamist rallies on international issues than domestic ones.

### A. Wahdah Islamiyah

With 150,000 cadres and sympathisers and 400 schools, Wahdah Islamiyah is currently the largest and best organised Salafi mass organisation in Indonesia. Unlike other prominent Islamic organisations that are Java-based, Wahdah's stronghold is South Sulawesi. Starting in 2016, it moved its headquarters from Makassar to Jakarta in the hope of increasing its national stature. Prior to that, founder Zaitun Rasmin had introduced Wahdah to Muslims on Java by constructing strategic alliances with more established organisations such as NU, Muhammadiyah, and Persatuan Islam (Persis), by forming the Indonesian Council of Young Intellectuals and Ulama (MIUMI) in 2012.<sup>27</sup> Besides being co-founder of MIUMI, Zaitun secured a prestigious position as the Deputy Secretary General of the Indonesia Ulama Council (MUI), whose opinion sealed Ahok's fate in 2017.

Zaitun's fame after the anti-Ahok campaign raised Wahdah's visibility and popularity in the capital region, but its involvement came with damaging consequences. For example, Wahdah teachers were suddenly dismissed from religious classes at some government agencies and SOEs in Jakarta and Central Java.<sup>28</sup> In 2022 the National Counterterrorism Agency (BNPT) put several Wahdah schools on its list of "198 ISIS-affiliated pesantren in Indonesia", which was detrimental to its religious outreach (*dakwah*) programs, although that list was so error-ridden that it was eventually retracted.<sup>29</sup> Every year, Wahdah aimed to send hundreds of its

<sup>27</sup> On the history of MIUMI, see IPAC, "After Ahok," p. 6.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with a representative of Wahdah Islamiyah's Central Board, Jakarta, 26 March 2022.

<sup>29</sup> "Data BNPT: Akurasi, Presisi, Validasi," hajjnews.co.id, 1 February 2022.

university graduates to conduct *dakwah* across the archipelago and set up branch offices and schools in every place visited. To be stigmatised as terrorist could strike at the heart of Wahdah's core agenda – to gradually Islamise Indonesian society from above and below, particularly through *dakwah* programs at top universities, schools and government circles. Accordingly, from 2018 onwards Wahdah began to distance itself from GNPf and FPI. As one leader said:

We remain cordial, but after GNPf was taken over by FPI, we were no longer active. Since they shifted the issue from religious blasphemy to practical politics...it made it difficult for us [to stay engaged]. Also, we can't deny the effects of repression, the police are openly arresting Muslim activists. Even Detachment 88 [the counter-terrorism police unit] is involved.<sup>30</sup>

For Wahdah, restoring good relations with the government was of utmost priority because, as a senior *ustadz* put it, "in order to make *dakwah* smooth, we must have access to power."<sup>31</sup> So instead of showing solidarity with FPI, its former ally, Wahdah has been busy charming the very government officials that persecuted it. They invited Mahfud MD, the Coordinating Minister for Politics, Law and Security to Makassar – and as of October 2023, the running mate of Ganjar Pranowo – twice between 2021 and 2022, in which the minister delivered lectures on Pancasila and nationalism. Wahdah also invited a top official from Detachment 88 to a national seminar at Wahdah's Makassar office to celebrate the Independence Day in August 2022.<sup>32</sup> The following endorsement from Mahfud was just what they needed to rehabilitate Wahdah's image:

I have known Zaitun Rasmin for a long time, we met about ten years ago through MIUMI. Zaitun Rasmin is a critical person, but he himself and Wahdah Islamiyah have internalised the spirit of the Unitary Republic of Indonesia and Pancasila. That is clearly written in their written documents and statements.<sup>33</sup>

Zaitun also accompanied Mahfud to India in November 2022 for a religious harmony meeting.

Wahdah actively sought cooperation and memoranda of understanding with various state agencies. It sent preachers to take part in MUI's religious moderation workshops.<sup>34</sup> Wahdah's department for family resilience visited the National Population and Family Planning Board (BKKBN) a few times in 2022-2023 to explore possible cooperation.<sup>35</sup> At the time, Wahdah hoped to be a government-approved provider of pre-marriage courses, through which they could insert their conservative – but also developmentalist – agenda such as prevention of

<sup>30</sup> Interview with a representative of Wahdah Islamiyah's Central Board, Jakarta, 26 March 2022.

<sup>31</sup> "Perjuangan Sang Murobbi Dalam Perjalanan Dakwah, Ust Herman Hasyim, S.Pd. MM (Part 2)", Wahdah TV, 7 March 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rYlwKSTyJ94>

<sup>32</sup> "Densus 88: Wahdah Islamiyah Telah Lulus Ujian Terhadap Kesetiaan dan Komitmen terhadap NKRI," wahdah.or.id, 18 August 2022.

<sup>33</sup> "Mahfud Minta Wahdah Islamiyah untuk Terus Menjaga Pancasila dan NKRI," republika.co.id, 19 December 2021.

<sup>34</sup> "Dai Wahdah Islamiyah Ikut Program Standardisasi Dai MUI Pusat," ummattv.com, 31 July 2022.

<sup>35</sup> "Jajaki Kolaborasi Bersama BKKBN, Wahdah Islamiyah Disambut Baik oleh Hasto Wardoyo," ummattv.com, 12 December 2022.

premarital sex, homosexuality and stunting in children. The women's wing of Wahdah has not shied away from working on gender mainstreaming issues with the Department of Women Empowerment and Child Protection.<sup>36</sup> A woman activist explained that while they disapprove of feminism, they fully support women's right to work outside the home as long as they wear a face veil and balance their family obligations.<sup>37</sup>

Like FPI, Wahdah has been working hard to expand its organisational structures, schools and other social enterprises in electorally significant regions, especially East Java and Central Java. Wahdah's rivals from the Salafi purist and jihadist groups often remark cynically that Wahdah is secretly trying to build a political party.<sup>38</sup> The reality, however, is more nuanced. Wahdah does not have any immediate ambition to launch a *dakwah* party akin to the Muslim Brotherhood or the Partai Keadilan Sejahtera (PKS). At the same time, its leaders understand the importance of having an Islamist-friendly regime that at the very least will not disturb their religious purification efforts. To that extent, they feel the need to mobilise their members as a voting bloc during each electoral cycle.

The biggest obstacle to Wahdah's religio-political expansion in Java is not the state but rather NU. Wahdah's approach to its gigantic religious rival is somewhat similar to the way they approach a hostile state: by displaying deference and respect so as not be considered a serious threat. NU members have long considered "Salafi Wahhabis" to be mortal enemies because they frequently condemn traditionalist religious practices as heretical.<sup>39</sup> It does not help that Wahdah women wear full face veiling which is often associated with Salafi adherents. To differentiate themselves from the Saudi-influenced Salafis that NU vilified, Wahdah women made a point of changing their appearance and mannerisms. They swapped their all-black attire for colourful *abaya* and *cadar*. They also invested more time in cultivating NU women leaders rather than Muhammadiyah ones.<sup>40</sup>

Zaitun Rasmin has for a long time sought to deepen relationships with traditionalist ulama within MUI, including Ma'ruf Amin, the NU cleric-turned-vice president, and Gus Yahya, the NU chair. Wahdah *ustadz* in Central and East Java also regularly engage NU clerics, particularly conservative ones, showering them with praise and interesting trivia about how Wahdah and NU share some intellectual traditions such as the *rukyyatul hilal* method for determining the lunar moon – as opposed to the *hisab* method, which has long been a sore point between NU and Muhammadiyah. These socialisation efforts might explain why, at a time when many Salafi *ustadzs* were expelled from East Java by NU's paramilitary wing, Wahdah has been largely left alone. It does not diminish the rivalry, however. NU sees Wahdah as trying to poach its members; Wahdah sees NU as trying to block its expansion.

<sup>36</sup> "Muslimah Wahdah Makassar Tandatangani MOU Bersama Dinas Pemberdayaan Perempuan dan Perlindungan Anak (DPPPA)," [wahdahmakassar.or.id](http://wahdahmakassar.or.id), 2 June 2022.

<sup>37</sup> Interview with Wahdah women's wing, Makassar, November 2022.

<sup>38</sup> See for instance Abu Abdillah Sofyan Chalid bin Idham Ruray, "Mengapa Saya Keluar dari Wahdah Islamiyah?," [antosafaly.wordpress.com](http://antosafaly.wordpress.com), 30 October 2009.

<sup>39</sup> "Wahhabi" in Indonesia is a derogatory term that traditionalists use to refer to its enemies, who prefer to be called Salafis. See IPAC, "The Anti-Salafi Campaign in Aceh," Report No. 48, 22 May 2016.

<sup>40</sup> Interview with Wahdah women's wing, Makassar, November 2022.

## B. Bachtiar Nasir's AQL

Six years after becoming the face of GNPF, Bachtiar Nasir, the founding leader of AQL, no longer appears on Indonesian television. The government punished him by effectively discontinuing his various TV shows, including a popular Quran memorisation contest for children, and cutting off his *dakwah* programs in state-owned banks and mosques. His charity foundation's bank account was frozen. In 2017, Bachtiar was accused of money laundering and terrorism financing, in connection with humanitarian aid that ended up in Syria. Though he was never formally charged, the case was left unsolved so that the police could conveniently reopen it if he again became active in politics. When he appeared on the campaign stage with Prabowo during the 2019 presidential election, for example, he immediately received a summons from the police.<sup>41</sup> He then disappeared from public view for the rest of the year, apparently fleeing to Brunei and Saudi Arabia in self-exile. He came back to AQL just as the Covid pandemic hit.

Rather than fading away into obscurity, Bachtiar Nasir has been using his time away from the spotlight to make up for lost time, followers and resources. For him and AQL, Covid turned out to be a blessing in disguise. Before the pandemic, Bachtiar's religious sessions would attract overflowing crowds to the AQL Islamic Centre in Tebet, South Jakarta, with many people having to camp out in the parking lot. He would look down upon his adoring audience from his glitzy stage. To his disciples, he was so close yet unreachable due to the sheer number of people who were vying for his attention. With Covid, AQL shifted most of their operations online. The shift to Zoom paradoxically brought Bachtiar closer to his disciples and allowed him to reach beyond Jakartan upper middle-class families. Thanks to Covid, AQL introduced two new online programs that attracted a sizable following: a morning *dzikir* session and an evening session of Quran contemplation and quizzes.<sup>42</sup>

The online sessions ran three to five hours long and yet many families, from grandparents to grandchildren, would sit together every day with enthusiasm in front of their phones and computer screens.<sup>43</sup> The children, who were out of school for almost three years during the pandemic, got hooked on the fun quizzes and story-telling. The older participants found solace in the morning *dzikir* sessions; many were elderly wealthy women who suddenly found themselves isolated from their extended family because of Covid or who lost relatives to the pandemic. The mostly female audience came from almost all big cities in Indonesia (e.g. Bandung, Malang, Makassar, Medan, Padang, Kendari) and some even came from Indonesian diaspora in Singapore, Malaysia, the US and Canada. Bachtiar and the other *ustadz* would address their regular participants by name, ask how they were doing and check on their family members. Covid allowed AQL members more time and space to bond with each other and with their leader in a way that would not otherwise have been possible. Even once the lockdown was over and Bachtiar returned to his packed *dakwah* schedule, he never missed the daily online sessions, joining the morning Zoom calls from a beach in Makassar, a hotel lounge in Mecca, or wherever he happened to be at the time.

<sup>41</sup> "Bachtiar Nasir Tak Penuhi Pemeriksaan Sebagai Tersangka," Kompas.com, 8 May 2019.

<sup>42</sup> See AQL YouTube channel, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCzCPcD08UPxhqj3TFmGXnA>

<sup>43</sup> Based on virtual participant observations of AQL live sessions throughout 2021-2022.

On the eve of AQL's 14<sup>th</sup> anniversary in August 2022, Bachtiar Nasir announced its transformation from an Islamic centre/educational foundation into a national mass organisation (*ormas*).<sup>44</sup> The broadening of AQL mass base proved to be useful not only as a source of donations, but also as a means to evade some of the bureaucratic hurdles that had been applied to AQL schools and its university. The structure and technical details of the new *ormas* are still being worked out, but for the time being it seems to be following a semi-franchise. Bachtiar's loyalists in several cities have endowed or loaned their properties to be converted into Rumah Tadabbur Quran (RTQ) or Quran Contemplation Schools, which double as AQL's de facto branches in their respective cities.<sup>45</sup> Many of the donors also fully cover the operational costs of the RTQs. The headquarters would typically supply teachers (recruited from Gontor alumni network),<sup>46</sup> administrative training and promotional support.

In contrast to Wahdah that has tried very hard to prove its loyalty to the government, AQL has been avoiding engagement with the state – unless absolutely necessary. Since the RTQs simply functioned as afterschool study, they did not need to be registered with the Education or Religious Affairs Ministry. However, some RTQs such as the one in Makassar became so successful that local stakeholders decided to convert them into a full-fledged boarding school or pesantren, using Bachtiar Nasir's name to increase their competitiveness in the vast market of private Islamic schools in Indonesia.<sup>47</sup>

Under pressure and surveillance from state authorities, Bachtiar Nasir as of October 2023 was no longer including political topics in his sermons. A senior agent from the State Intelligence Agency has reportedly become one of his disciples, not secretly planted as such but rather with his full knowledge. This kind of direct and indirect surveillance keeps Islamist leaders on their toes, but as AQL has shown, it has not stopped them from pursuing alternative techniques to widen their influence among the faithful.

Although AQL has avoided domestic political issues, Bachtiar Nasir and his MIUMI network used the October 2023 Israeli retaliatory attack on Gaza as a pretext for mass mobilisation that up till then he avoided. Speaking at a national seminar on 13 October, Bachtiar advised his audience to consider the 2024 presidential candidates' commitment to the Palestinian plight as a selection criterion for voting.<sup>48</sup> On 15 October, thousands joined in the pro-Palestine rally in front of Masjid Al-Azhar Jakarta that he organised on behalf of the Indonesian Coalition to Defend Baitul Maqdis (KIBBM), in which he demanded that Indonesia send KIBBM to Palestine on a humanitarian mission.<sup>49</sup> This may presage other attempts to draw the candidates into a Palestinian solidarity campaign.

<sup>44</sup> "AQL Islamic Center Bertransformasi Menjadi Ormas ADABQU," *hidayatullah.com*, 3 August 2022.

<sup>45</sup> Interview with AQL member, Jakarta, 15 June 2023.

<sup>46</sup> The Quran teachers were mostly Bachtiar's juniors at Pesantren Darul Huffadh 77 Bone, a Quran memorisation school founded by the late Lanre Said, a former *qadhi* of Darul Islam South Sulawesi. There has been much overlap between Gontor and 77 throughout the decades: at first Lanre Said sent one of his sons to study in Gontor in the 1980s and since then many Gontor graduates including Bachtiar himself went on to memorise the holy book in Bone.

<sup>47</sup> The pesantren in Bone was named Madrasah Hafizh Quran (MHQ) AQL Sulawesi Selatan.

<sup>48</sup> "KING MAKER | PALESTINA MERDEKA!!! Dimata Mardigu Wowiek, Abraham Samad, Ustadz Bachtiar Nasir", Bachtiar Nasir YouTube channel, 13 October 2023.

<sup>49</sup> "Ribuan Warga Ikut Aksi Solidaritas Dukung Palestina di Masjid Al-Azhar," *metrotvnews.com*, 15 October 2023.

## V. RESPONSE OF HTI

HTI, part of a transnational nonviolent movement that promotes the return of the caliphate as a system of universal governance, was formally banned by executive decree on 8 May 2017. It was accused by expert government witnesses as harbouring subversive objectives to overthrow the Indonesian government.<sup>50</sup> The first thing HTI leaders did in response was to call their lawyers. In July 2017, two months after the banning, they submitted an appeal to the Constitutional Court, challenging the legality of the decree. They also mobilised their followers to organise small-scale protests against the emergency decree, although they were careful to not use HTI's name and symbols when protesting on the street.<sup>51</sup> When the Constitutional Court ruled against them, they tried to challenge the decision of the Law and Human Rights Ministry that revoked HTI's legal status.<sup>52</sup> When all legal appeals ended in defeat, HTI returned to its Soeharto-era *modus operandi*, working through cover organisations. But by 2017, it had grown so adept at operating through a network of educational institutions, charities and creative industries that it could seamlessly go back to business as usual and continue to teach and recruit as if nothing had happened.

HTI has, nonetheless, kept its members in line, making sure they do not behave recklessly in response to the banning. At the same time, HTI spokesperson Ismail Yusanto has continued to speak openly and critically about state policies – albeit in a noncontroversial tone.<sup>53</sup> HTI did not try to approach the government as Wahdah did, or cease political activities like AQL, in part because the international HT movement enforces strong control mechanisms which ensure that its national chapters broadly implement the organisation's "methodology for change".<sup>54</sup>

A key concept in HT's political methodology is the need to shatter the bond of trust between the ruler and the ruled (*kasyf al-khuththat wa dlarb al-alaqat*) through disclosure of any secular government's conspiracies against the ummah. This fixation on "public opinion-shaping" means that activists are trained to constantly weigh in on issues of the day through print bulletins, online media and YouTube channels that they control.<sup>55</sup> They produce commentaries on all kinds of national policies from health and education to fiscal policies and international relations. Since after the ban, activists could no longer display their organisational affiliation in public, they formed numerous "think tanks" to give a veneer of intellectual authority to their commentaries. Examples include Indonesia Justice Monitor, Pusat Kajian dan Analisis Data, and the women-led Mutiara Umat Institute. These self-styled

<sup>50</sup> "Disidang, Kemenkumham Klaim HTI Mengajak Lakukan Kudeta," [republika.co.id](http://republika.co.id), 4 January 2018.

<sup>51</sup> "Akhwat Pegang Spanduk, Begini Demo Tolak Perppu Ormas di Depan DPR," [detik.com](http://detik.com), 21 August 2017.

<sup>52</sup> "HTI Uji Perppu Ormas," [mkri.id](http://mkri.id), 26 July 2017.

<sup>53</sup> HTI leaders know how to select their words so as to avoid defamation charges.

<sup>54</sup> *The Methodology of Hizb ut-Tahrir for Change*, Al-Khilafah Publications, 1999, ebook available at <https://www.hizb-australia.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Methodology-of-Hizb-ut-Tahrir-for-Change.pdf>

<sup>55</sup> Examples of the print media include *Kaffah*, *Media Umat* and *Al-Wa'ie*. There are also countless examples of pro-HTI social media channels such as Khilafah Channel Reborn (<https://www.youtube.com/c/khilafahchannelreborn>), Ustadz Ismail Yusanto Official (<https://www.youtube.com/c/UIYOfficial>), and Shautul Ulama Media ([shautululama.co](http://shautululama.co)).

experts would publish their op-eds or get interviewed by HTI publications such as *Media Umat*, Muslimahnews.net and Visi Muslim Media. There are hundreds more of websites and blogs created by ordinary HTI supporters (*hizbiyyin*). Indeed, HTI activists spent most of their time not on learning classical Islamic literature (like Salafis) nor investigating immorality (like FPI), but rather discussing politics and dissecting the copious writings of its founding ideologue, Taqiyuddin al-Nabhani.

Considering that HTI is primarily an intellectual movement, it is curious that the government has not systematically censored HTI books and online media – which have grown exponentially since the banning. This has led many Islamists to believe that the government was never genuinely concerned about a HTI threat and that the banning was mainly meant to send a warning to other Islamist opposition groups, especially FPI. It might also explain why HTI activists have not been deterred, because no HTI leading figures have been charged with a criminal offence thus far.

Neither has the government tried to harass the numerous schools, charities and businesses which are known to be affiliated with former HTI leaders. One obvious example is Sekolah Insantama, the school network owned by Ismail Yusanto. Despite the efforts of some social media influencers (buzzers) to expose Insantama's link to HTI and advocate for its closure, the Ministry of Education has not done anything more than pay surprise visits to those schools and check whether they conduct flag ceremonies and teach civic education (which, as any reputable private schools, they do).<sup>56</sup>

Another success story of HTI's religious commodification which has not been affected by the proscription is Badan Wakaf Al-Qur'an (BWA), a non-profit established in 2005 by Heru Binawan, a former head of HTI's Central Board. Knowing that property endowment (*wakaʿ*) is not a realistic goal for many ordinary Muslims, BWA introduced wakaf al-Qur'an, collecting small donations to distribute free copies of Quran in Muslim-minority regions.<sup>57</sup> Since its establishment, BWA has distributed 1.5 million copies of Qur'an (worth \$9.6 million), thanks to its effective fundraising methods such as partnering up with the mosque management at major shopping malls.<sup>58</sup> Pro-NU sites and social media influencers have similarly demanded, to no avail, the government to shut down BWA given its connection to a former HTI leader.<sup>59</sup>

Since the Covid restrictions were lifted in 2022, HTI has resumed its street mobilisation, with thousands of male and female activists parading the black-and-white flags around Indonesia on the eve of Islamic New Year and Ramadhan.<sup>60</sup> HTI activists have also organised protests

<sup>56</sup> "Sekolah Binaan Kaum Radikal, Bubarkan!," *harakatuna.com*, 12 April 2021; "Masih Mau Memasukkan Anak ke SIT Insantama Cendekia Setelah Mengetahui Siapa Ketuanya?," *Seward.com*, 9 April 2021.

<sup>57</sup> "1500 Pengusaha Muslim Dukung Syariah dan Khilafah," *tribunnews.com*, 27 January 2012.

<sup>58</sup> Sofiyon Rudianto, Qurroh Ayuniyyah and Trisiladi Supriyanto, "Strategi Pengelolaan Wakaf Meraih Kepercayaan Umat, Menuju Optimalisasi Pengumpulan: Studi Kasus Badan Wakaf Al-Quran," *Diversity: Jurnal Ilmiah Pascasarjana*, Vol. 1, Issue 2, Agustus 2021, p 87-113.

<sup>59</sup> "BWA dan Jejak Pemimpin HTI: Menunggu Giliran Dicabut Izin Operasionalnya oleh Pemerintah?," *harakatuna.com*, 7 July 2022.

<sup>60</sup> HTI held a series of "Islam Kaffah" parades in West Java and South Sulawesi, among other places. "Ribuan Warga Ikuti Pawai Obor Tahrib Ramadan 1443 H," *timesindonesia.co.id*, 31 March 2022; "Aliansi Umat Islam Sulsel: Sambut Ramadhan dengan Gembira," *mediasulsel.com*, 31 March 2022.

against government policies such as the construction of a new capital city in Kalimantan and the Rempang eviction, although they avoided carrying HTI's name and symbols in those demonstrations.<sup>61</sup> It means that HTI still has a substantial mobilising power. However, there is nothing (as of this writing) that could lure HTI into electoral involvement. None of the declared candidates have expressed any concerns about HTI's fate or criticised Jokowi's anti-radicalism campaign. The status quo, while not ideal, has allowed them to survive, whereas speaking up about the election could trigger another crackdown.

## VI. ISLAMISTS AND THE 2024 ELECTIONS

Both FPI and the Salafi-modernist leadership have made clear their support for Anies as the election draws closer, but this is unlikely to involve mass mobilisation – unless Anies tries to link support for Palestine to support for his candidacy and brings many other Muslim groups to his side. But even this unlikely scenario would cause little change in the wide lead that Ganjar and Prabowo have over him in the polls.

### A. FPI and the 212 Alumni network

FPI and its so-called Three Pillar alliance with GNPF and PA 212 had not officially endorsed any presidential candidate as of October 2023, but it was highly probable that they would back Anies, especially because they believe that Jokowi and his allies, whom they despise, are out to sabotage his candidacy. If Anies loses in the first round, leaving Ganjar and Prabowo, they might back Prabowo, though this possibility has receded with the likelihood that Prabowo will choose Jokowi's son as a running mate. Even though they see Prabowo as having betrayed their trust by joining the Jokowi government in 2019, anyone, in their view, is better than Ganjar, and officials of Prabowo's party Gerindra have been careful to maintain good relations with FPI.<sup>62</sup> Some FPI teachers admitted receiving financial contributions from Gerindra politicians, apparently for charity purposes.<sup>63</sup> When FPI leaders ran into trouble with the law, they could count on help from a Gerindra-affiliated legal aid agency.<sup>64</sup> In this way, Gerindra was more consistent in aiding FPI than Anies ever was. All of this could work to mitigate the sense of Prabowo's treachery.

Support for Anies, however, is not unqualified. FPI leaders have repeatedly stated that to get their endorsement, candidates must be willing to put their commitment to Islamists in black and white.<sup>65</sup> Until all candidates are confirmed and an ulama conference (*ijtima ulama*) has

<sup>61</sup> HTI protesters demonstrated their solidarity with the Rempang plight on behalf of "Aliansi Masyarakat Peduli Rempang", see "Video: Ribuan Umat Muslim Surabaya Demo Tolak Rempang Eco City", *liputan6.com*, 27 September 2023.

<sup>62</sup> Some Gerindra politicians such as Fadli Zon, Ahmad Syafii and Habiburrahman spoke up for the slain FPI "martyrs" and attended their funeral. "2 Legislator Gerindra Jemput 6 Jenazah Laskar FPI," *solopos.com*, 9 December 2020; "Politisi Gerindra Blak-blakan: Kapolri Siap Buka Lagi Kasus KM 50, Mobil Bekas Berondongan Polisi Bisa Jadi Novum!", *populis.id*. 14 November 2022.

<sup>63</sup> Interview with FPI senior activist, Jakarta, 14 March 2022.

<sup>64</sup> Interview with FPI senior activist, Jakarta, 13 June 2023.

<sup>65</sup> "Jelang Pilpres 2024, Ketua GNPF Ungkit Janji Prabowo di 2019", *beritasatu.com*, 20 September 2023.

been held to select and sign an agreement with the chosen candidate, FPI as an organisation will remain neutral. The degree of support for Anies also varies within FPI. GNPF chairman Yusuf Martak and former FPI Jakarta leader Muchsin Alatas have made public appearances with Anies on multiple occasions, but some senior FPI activists interviewed still expressed reservations about him.<sup>66</sup> Some thought that he did not contribute much to the Islamist cause except for a few symbolic actions, such as closing down a couple of night clubs and allowing the use of public roads and parks for religious gatherings (*pengajian*), which had been forbidden by Ahok. Some FPI leaders were particularly disappointed that Anies kept silent when the six FPI guards were killed by police in late 2020.<sup>67</sup> Still others faulted Anies for not hiring FPI preachers to deliver sermons at government-owned mosques while allowing HTI preacher Felix Siau to do so.<sup>68</sup> Nevertheless, most FPI members acknowledge that Anies is better than the other candidates. If not an Islamist himself, Anies would at least leave them alone.

Despite these reservations within the FPI elite, Anies has enjoyed massive support from sympathisers at the grassroots level. Their rosy impression of Anies as a pious, highly educated and eloquent leader – i.e. the antithesis of Ahok – has remained unsullied by awareness of his political tactics. Many 212 alumni have joined the various pro-Anies volunteer groups (*relawan*) such as Sobat Anies, BroNies and Manies. The surprise visit of Anies and his running mate to FPI headquarters in Petamburan on 27 September 2023 received extensive media coverage. However, FPI advisor KH Qurthubi Jaelani was quick to clarify that the visit did not signify political backing. As Qurthubi cautioned on FPI's YouTube channel:

Don't let your imagination run wild. Habib Rizieq was merely showing respect to his guests. Islam teaches us to welcome anyone who visits our home, even if it's Satan himself... FPI has not made any decision about the presidential candidate because politics are very dynamic. [Everything] can change at the last minute. If we determine our position now and suddenly the ticket falls through, what will happen to us?<sup>69</sup>

FPI leaders are also worried about Anies' political party sponsor, Nasdem. They deeply distrust Nasdem founder and media tycoon Surya Paloh, who, until early 2023, was Jokowi's ally. The bad blood between FPI and Nasdem dates back to the 2017 gubernatorial election when FPI accused Nasdem politician Viktor Laiskodat of blasphemy and reported him to the police while threatening to turn him into another Ahok (*di-Ahok-kan*).<sup>70</sup> During the 2019 election campaign, Islamist social media engaged in a fierce battle against Paloh's television station Metro TV which, according to them, was spreading anti-Prabowo and anti-Islamist propaganda. This history has led some in FPI to suspect that Paloh will drop his backing for

<sup>66</sup> "Anies Baswedan Resmikan Pembangunan Masjid Fatimah Muhammad yang Diklaim Ramah Lingkungan," *liputan6.com*, 20 August 2020; "Anies 'Gubernur Indonesia' Tiba, Jamaah Maulid Nabi Di Aula Ri'ayatul Haq Sambut Meriah", *faktakini.info*, 9 November 2019.

<sup>67</sup> Interview with FPI activists, Jakarta, 26 July 2023.

<sup>68</sup> "Felix Siau Ceramah di Masjid Balai Kota, GP Ansor Gelar Aksi," *cnnindonesia.com*, 26 June 2019.

<sup>69</sup> "Sambutan Abuya KH Qurthubi dalam Maulid Akbar Nabi Muhammad Bersama DPP FPI", *Islamic Brotherhood Television*, 27 September 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kqfz9l0HbL8>

<sup>70</sup> "Viktor Laiskodat Bakal di Ahok-kan, Polri Lepas Tagngan," *moeslimchoice.com*, 19 December 2017.

Anies at the last minute, just to thwart the Islamists and prevent them from having any candidate they can support.<sup>71</sup>

FPI people when interviewed in September did not seem to object to Anies' selection of Muhaimin Iskandar, head of the NU-affiliated Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa (PKB), as his running mate, even though both PKB and Nasdem were part of Jokowi's coalition and Muhaimin had an outstanding corruption case against him. They knew that Anies desperately needed Muhaimin's East Java political base to win. Moreover, in line with the principle that "the enemy of my enemy is my friend", they could also accept Muhaimin because his fiercest rival within PKB was Yaqut Cholil Qoumas, Jokowi's Minister of Religious Affairs and formerly a vocal defendant of Ahok.

There is little probability that FPI would support Ganjar in a second round. They hold PDIP chairwoman Megawati and her close confidant Police Gen. (ret.) Budi Gunawan, chair of the State Intelligence Agency, personally responsible for all the oppression Islamist groups and activists have faced since 2017. FPI and its affiliates have circulated online narratives depicting Ganjar as an LGBT ally – apparently because his posters show rainbow colours. A video of Ganjar having a meal with some Chinese businessmen was also spread with captions suggesting that he was the lackey of alleged communist tycoons. Another began circulating in October 2023 after the eruption of the Gaza war showing Ganjar's supporters carrying an Israeli flag. Such narratives could surface more widely, raising the possibility of small, localised clashes between FPI and Ganjar supporters but nothing close to the 2019 violence in the streets of Jakarta.

## **B. Salafi-modernists: working behind the scenes for Anies**

Wahdah Islamiyah and AQL have shown unwavering support for Anies in different ways. The Wahdah leadership has been close to Anies since he was elected governor. Zaitun Rasmin and others proudly posted evidence of their friendship with Anies on social media, while avoiding direct criticism of Jokowi. Zaitun mobilised Wahdah's senior activists to promote Anies to their cadres and extended families but not necessarily to join Anies' campaign team. Bachtiar Nasir, as noted above, has been much more careful in avoiding political themes but would give his blessing to followers who wished to join Anies volunteer teams on their own, without AQL's name.

Anies is a natural ally for Wahdah given his modernist (Muhammadiyah) background and the fact that he was backed by the Makassar elite in Jakarta, especially former Vice President Jusuf Kalla, a long-time patron of Wahdah. The group's friendship with Anies began during the anti-Ahok campaign and has continued to grow. Zaitun was asked to give a speech at one of Anies' victory parties in 2017.<sup>72</sup> In November 2021, Zaitun and his colleagues were welcomed by Anies in his City Hall office.<sup>73</sup> A month later, Anies delivered a keynote speech

<sup>71</sup> Interview with FPI senior activist, Jakarta, 13 June 2023.

<sup>72</sup> "Zaitun Rasmin: Anies-Sandi Akan Wujudkan Jakarta yang Berkeadilan dan Berbahagia," swamedium.com, 15 October 2017.

<sup>73</sup> "Terima Pengurus Wahdah Islamiyah, Ini Pesan Anies Soal Perbedaan," langit7.id, 12 November 2021.

at the grand opening of Wahdah's National Congress (*Muktamar*).<sup>74</sup> Before he left office in 2022 when his five-year term was up, Anies gave Wahdah rent-free office space at a government-owned building in South Jakarta. Wahdah showed its gratitude by using its online media to publish stories about Anies' achievements and his vision for Indonesia.<sup>75</sup> Of course, Wahdah leaders expect something in return. They believe, rather wishfully, that Anies will win eventually, if not in 2024, then perhaps in the next election. If or when he does, they hope that having seen Wahdah's loyalty, Anies will adopt some of Wahdah's programs as his own and make Wahdah the government's preferred partner in public health and social assistance delivery (in some ways mirroring the role that NU now plays for Jokowi).<sup>76</sup>

If Wahdah's leadership believes in the merit of political engagement as a tool for *dakwah*, its grassroots followers are less enthusiastic. Many have been socialised into the purist Salafi view that considers politics a distraction from studying religion. In 2004, when Wahdah's Sharia Council first issued a fatwa that recommended Muslims to cast their votes in democratic elections, a number of *ustadz* left because they thought Wahdah had been "infected" by the Muslim Brotherhood virus, since the Brotherhood supports active political engagement. Since then, purist Salafi groups in Makassar and elsewhere have accused Wahdah of using its *dakwah* programs to build a party, much like PKS. This has further discouraged Wahdah members from taking part in political discussions.

During a national meeting in July 2023, Zaitun expressed his frustration that many rank-and-file cadres were still allergic to politics.<sup>77</sup> He issued an instruction to all senior activists and mentors (*murabbi*) to incorporate political awareness-raising campaigns in their weekly study circles. Some mentors objected that it might cause them to lose potential recruits to purist Salafi groups. One woman said that it was awkward to suddenly bring up politics in a Quran memorisation class, particularly if some students were also taking classes at a rival Salafi group.<sup>78</sup> In late September 2023, however, Wahdah activists posted online flyers urging readers to join a "happy morning walk with Anies and Muhaimin" event in Makassar – most likely on Zaitun's order rather than their own initiative.<sup>79</sup> He also instructed Wahdah branches to urge members to attend pro-Anies rallies in their respective towns.

Wahdah also has been involved in legislative campaigning in South Sulawesi and beyond. The women's wing has pledged support for Listiety F Nurdin, a candidate for the national parliament from Golkar, because as the wife of former South Sulawesi governor, Nurdin Abdullah, she facilitated Wahdah programs.<sup>80</sup> Active cadres are not allowed to stand as candidates, so a number of senior activists withdrew from Wahdah, with the leaders' tacit

<sup>74</sup> "Anies Baswedan Harapkan Wahdah Islamiyah Siapkan Materi Pendidikan untuk Orangtua," [wahdah.or.id](http://wahdah.or.id), 21 December 2021.

<sup>75</sup> "Anies adalah Jalan Menuju Indonesia Bebas Korupsi," [mujahiddakwah.com](http://mujahiddakwah.com), 9 July 2023; "Anies adalah Kita, Kita adalah Anies," [mujahiddakwah.com](http://mujahiddakwah.com), 26 March 2022.

<sup>76</sup> One of the religious programs that Wahdah hoped would be adopted by Anies is school-based *tarbiyah*, which means Islamic/moral education. Taken from the Muslim Brotherhood's concept, *tarbiyah* entails intensive religious study circles to not only indoctrinate but also mold the personal behavior and characteristics of young Muslims in accordance with Salafi values.

<sup>77</sup> Interview with Wahdah Islamiyah activist, Makassar, 14 July 2023.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> "Ketum Wahdah Islamiyah: Warga Tumpah Ruah di Makassar Bukti Kecintaan ke Pak Anies," [kbanews.com](http://kbanews.com), 25 September 2023.

<sup>80</sup> It did not seem to bother them that Nurdin was convicted for corruption.

support, in order to run as legislative candidates from like-minded Islamic parties such as PKS, Partai Amanat Nasional (PAN) and others. Another Makassarese politician who has enjoyed Wahdah's support is Tamsil Linrung, a veteran Islamist activist, former PKS politician and current member of the Regional Representative Council (DPD).<sup>81</sup> Tamsil, who has been a benefactor to Wahdah over the years, is also a major donor for some of Anies' volunteer teams both in Jakarta and South Sulawesi.

As for AQL, its followers are more modernist than Salafi and as such have no problem with electoral participation. Many regulars of AQL religious classes were volunteers for the Prabowo campaign in 2019 and for Anies in 2017. Several are working for Anies' presidential campaign; some even suggested that Anies has quietly promised to appoint Bachtiar Nasir as Minister of Religious Affairs if he wins.<sup>82</sup>

The major barrier to AQL's political involvement is government pressure on its leader. In 2021, after laying low for almost two years, Bachtiar Nasir attempted to host a webinar series on policy-related issues, including taking a critical look at Jokowi's religious moderation campaign. Bachtiar would merely serve as emcee and let other speakers from MIUMI lead the discussion. The speakers were critical of the state-led promotion of "moderate" Islam, which rendered other (non-NU) concepts of moderation (*wasathiyah*) being stigmatised as radical.<sup>83</sup> One of the speakers, Farid Okbah, was later arrested on terrorism charges for his involvement in Jemaah Islamiyah.<sup>84</sup> Since then, Bachtiar Nasir has barely spoken about politics in public. It is possible that he may wait until the last minute to endorse Anies – as he did Prabowo in 2019.

Since Salafi-modernists are firmly rooted in the Anies camp, the chances that they may shift to Prabowo in the first round of the elections are relatively low. It is not clear whom Wahdah would choose in the event of a Prabowo vs Ganjar head-to-head race in the second round. The choice of Jokowi's son as his vice-presidential candidate might make Prabowo unacceptable, and Ganjar's choice of Mahfud as his running mate might ease the concern of Salafi-modernists about Ganjar's moral character and their dislike of PDIP.<sup>85</sup>

### C. HTI: back to abstention

HTI's default position is to refuse to participate in democracy or any other system that is not explicitly based on Islamic shari'a. In contrast to Salafis and FPI, HTI would not normally invest its time and energy in getting followers to support political candidates. However, as

<sup>81</sup> "Tiga Tokoh Asal Makassar Temui Anies Baswedan, Ini yang Dibahas," fajar.co.id, 24 November 2022.

<sup>82</sup> Interview with AQL member, Jakarta, 15 June 2023.

<sup>83</sup> "Moderasi Beragama vs Wasathiyah Islam," Ustadz Fahmi Salim Channel, 7 October 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=XqV4SZt93No>

<sup>84</sup> "Indonesia: Militant Group Behind Bali Bombings Tries to Infiltrate Govt Institutions," benarnews.org, 17 November 2021.

<sup>85</sup> Islamists have condemned a statement that came up during Ganjar's interview with a highly popular YouTuber, Deddy Corbuzier (who has 21 million subscribers as of 2023). Corbuzier asked Ganjar about his past scandal, in which he "accidentally" liked a porn video on Twitter. Ganjar retorted, "What's wrong if I watch porn?," explaining that personal consumption of pornography is an individual right. "Ngaku Suka Nonton Porno, Ganjar Pranowo: Saya Dewasa dan Sehat," kumparan.com, 4 December 2019.

noted in a previous IPAC report, HTI made an exception in 2017, when it campaigned against Ahok for governor of Jakarta, and 2019, when it joined Prabowo supporters against Jokowi, but without formally endorsing Prabowo or even explicitly mentioning his name.<sup>86</sup> It was one of the first organisations to organise rallies against Ahok, even before the 212 movement emerged. HTI's *Media Umat* bulletin devoted many of its issues to denigrating Ahok and his so-called pro-China policies such as forcibly evicting the mostly-Muslim population of Jakarta's coastal villages for the profit of Chinese developers.

This time around, HTI has been less inclined to back Anies or Prabowo. HTI's most famous preacher, Felix Siau – who has 5 million Instagram followers – has made his feelings about Anies clear in recent statements. For instance, in July 2022 when Anies agreed to FPI's demand that he close down the Holywings bar chain, Felix expressed his disapproval on a national television. He contended that the governor could have converted Holywings into halal-friendly restaurants to keep staff employed.<sup>87</sup> In his interview with opposition YouTuber Reffy Harun (who has 2.8 million subscribers), Felix was asked whether he would choose Anies or Prabowo. His answer was typical of HTI: "We need a leader who can implement God's law, but I would never say, elect such and such a candidate."<sup>88</sup> Other HTI *ustadz* including Ismail Yusanto also emphasised the futility of any democratic election as it would only change the individual leader rather than replacing the whole system.<sup>89</sup>

## VII. CONCLUSION

Islamist groups may be angry and frustrated over the government's anti-radicalism campaign, but many have chosen to accommodate it for now. One result has been a hesitancy to mobilise vigorously for the 2024 elections. The lack of any candidate as disliked as Jokowi was in 2019 has removed both a sense of unity and the atmosphere that polarised the electorate in 2019. Mass mobilisation on a national scale is therefore unlikely.

But as political actors, Islamists have unmatched perseverance, resourcefulness and optimism in the face of adversity. No other opposition groups – e.g. students, rights groups, labour unions – can claim the kind of grassroots networks and consistency that Islamists have built. But they also have an unrivalled capacity for internal fighting and fragmentation, greatly reducing their political effectiveness.

Despite the government crackdown, Islamist groups have not been discouraged from political engagement, even if they are masters of changing tactics as the political context requires. FPI's revival shows it was not cowed by the actions against its leaders, and many politicians have made a point of seeking its support. Wahdah Islamiyah has been steadily

<sup>86</sup> IPAC, "Indonesian Islamists and Post-Election Protests in Jakarta," Report No. 58, 23 July 2019.

<sup>87</sup> "Ustadz Felix Siau Nggak Sepakat Sama Anies Baswedan yang Tutup Holywings Gegara Miras: Kan Bisa Suruh Jalan Bajigur," *populis.id*, 29 June 2022.

<sup>88</sup> "Pilih Anies atau prabowo? Felix Siau: Saya Tidak Pernah Lihat Orangnya!," Reffy Harun Channel, 10 October 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=otP-7Uo4yr4>

<sup>89</sup> "IJM: Ruang Pilpres Hanya Bisa Mengubah Orangnya Bukan Sistemnya," *mediaumat.id*, 16 September 2023.

expanding its networks, as have AQL, HTI and other Islamist groups in Indonesia. The aim is the Islamisation of Indonesian society, not electoral office, but that goal is not possible to achieve without executive and legislative support – so for all but HTI, engagement becomes not only possible but highly desirable.

No major issues have emerged or are on the horizon that suggest any threat to national security or stability from the 2024 elections. Indonesian politics, however, defy prediction, and it is remotely possible that a perfect storm of political crisis, economic downturn and regional or international conflict – such as the Gaza war – could spark another round of mass mobilisation from Islamist groups. But if the groups have a proven capacity for such mobilisation, the government also has a proven track record for defusing issues likely to trigger it. As of late 2023, Indonesian Islamists seemed to be relegated to the political margins.

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