

DEMOCRACY DIGEST

Is Indonesia's 'pious democracy' safe from Islamist extremism?



Wikipedia

Indonesia remains a model of moderate Islam, [the country's president said on Monday](#), countering critics who point to mass rallies by radical Muslims and the jailing of a Christian politician for blasphemy as evidence its reputation is crumbling, Reuters reports:

Indonesia's state ideology includes national unity, social justice and democracy alongside belief in God, and enshrines religious diversity in a secular system of government. Hardline Islamist groups were banned under the authoritarian regime of President Suharto, which ended in 1998, but they have gained ground in recent years, emerging from the fringes of society in the world's biggest Muslim-majority country.

Religious and political tensions spiraled at the end of last year when Islamists led protests by hundreds of thousands in Jakarta against the capital's then governor, an ethnic-Chinese Christian who was charged with insulting the Koran. Governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, an ally of President Widodo, [lost his bid for re-election to a Muslim](#)

rival in April after months of agitation against him by a radical group, the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI).



“Pluralism has always been a part of Indonesia’s DNA,” [Joko Widodo told Reuters](#) in an interview at the presidential palace in Jakarta. “Despite many challenges, Islam in Indonesia has always been a force for moderation.”

Humanitarian Islam

Widodo’s reassurance coincides with reports that Islamist extremist group Hizb ut-Tahrir has declared it [wants to enforce Sharia law](#) across [Indonesia](#).

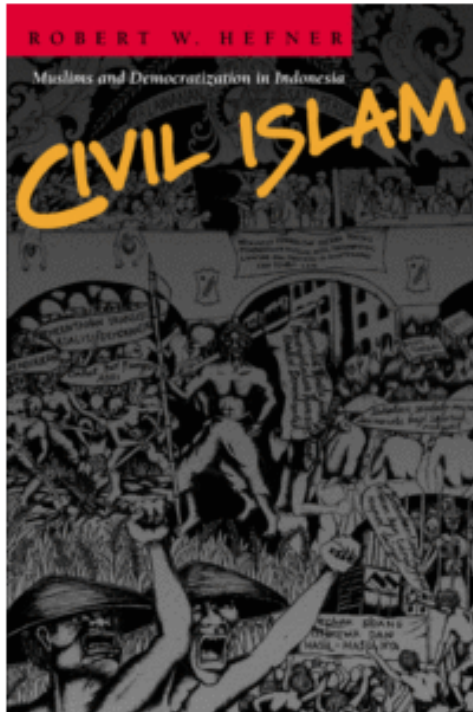
GP Anzor, the youth wing of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), has launched a Humanitarian Islam movement to counter an understanding of Islam that has birthed conflicts, including acts of terrorism, [The Jakarta Post](#) adds:

NU supreme council secretary general Yahya Cholil Staquf, who is one of GP Anzor’s emissaries to promote the Humanitarian Islam movement, said the contextualization of Islam within current conditions was important.... Charles Holland Taylor, (right, center) said the term Humanitarian Islam had been adopted by GP Anzor to express the spirit of Islam Nusantara, a principal introduced by NU, which embodies the values of kindness, compassion and humility.



Yahya is the leading proponent of [what Nahdlatul Ulama calls Islam Nusantara](#), the Islam of the archipelago, analysts [Keith Loveard and Bastiaan Scherpen write for The Diplomat](#):

He and his allies argue that Islam in Indonesia is different from that in most other parts of the world because it did not arrive at the end of a sword, but peacefully. The preachers who arrived in Java starting in the 15th century – the Wali Songo – were prepared to incorporate local practices, including elements of animism, into the understanding and practice of Islam.



“We have tended to deny the very real facts underlying the growth of extremism and terrorism, and this is what Humanitarian Islam is designed to address,” said Taylor, who cofounded and chairs the [LibForAll Foundation](#).

Indonesian Muslims seek a state and society that promotes religious values and the rights of [religious communities alongside individual rights](#) and religious pluralism. Their goal is a society in which individuals, organizations and the state are partly [responsible for one another’s moral condition](#), notes [Jeremy Menchik](#), Assistant Professor of International Relations at Boston University.

But the emergence of militant Islamists like [Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia](#) and the Islamic State has made it difficult for moderate Muslims to implement their vision for a pious democracy. The high profile of militants makes it difficult for the American public to understand the difference between militants and

moderate Muslims. They are similar in that neither militants nor moderates want a secular state. But they are different in that moderates do not want to live in an Islamic state, he [writes for The Conversation](#):

Data from a global network of social scientists, the [World Values Survey](#), show that in 2006 the overwhelming majority of Indonesians [did not want a government](#) in which religious leaders tell people how to vote. More recent data suggest not much has changed. A poll [conducted in May 2017](#) shows most Indonesians oppose replacement of the constitution with a caliphate. More than 80 percent oppose IS, and less than 3 percent support the goals of IS, according to recent data from [a research and consulting firm based in Jakarta](#).

In the wake of the Jakarta election, Jokowi has started hitting back at the opposition. And though his institutional pull did little to lighten Purnama’s sentence for blasphemy, the president has found greater success pulling the other security and legal levers at his disposal, [a recent STRATFOR analysis suggests](#):

Authorities arrested five of the Jakarta protest movement's leaders in early April for allegedly plotting to take over parliament and overthrow the government. The leader of the FPI, meanwhile, was charged in May with distributing pornography after having reportedly sent salacious text messages to his mistress. Furthermore, Jokowi moved May 8 to ban Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia under a law passed in 2013 that gives the president broad powers to regulate nongovernmental organizations. He could also step up his outreach to moderate clerics and increase Indonesia's activities in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation to firm up his support among Muslim voters.



Eid ul-Fitr prayer at Istiqlal Mosque in Indonesia, the largest mosque in Southeast Asia. Credit: Wikicommons

“But no matter what tactics he tries, the president’s political opposition will continue to challenge him and his ruling coalition,” [STRATFOR notes](#). “Although Jokowi’s position is still strong three years into his five-year term, he faces an uphill battle on the way to the 2019 election.”

New counter-terrorism measures raise the risk that “a military with enhanced domestic power could lead to [abuses of power, infringing upon democracy](#) and civil society,” according to Global Risk Insights.

Indonesia’s law prohibiting blasphemy or the defamation of religion is oppressive. It suppresses free speech and individual rights, inviting abuse and enforcement by [vigilante groups](#). But that does not mean Indonesian democracy is destined to become a [theocracy](#) in which government policy is divinely inspired, [Menchik contends](#):

It is one of a body of laws that, as my research revealed, have been on the books for decades. Contrary to what some observers have suggested, these laws are not a result of Islamic extremism from Saudi Arabia or IS. Instead, they [reflect the views of Islamic civil society organizations](#). These organizations run thousands of schools, health clinics and universities, and provide the backbone for the civil society that [helps make democracy work](#).

<http://www.demdigest.org/indonesias-pious-democracy-safe-islamist-extremism/>