Islamic pride fills a stadium, but Pancasila rules the polls

Muslims for Muslims...supporters of the Prosperous Justice Party rallied in central Jakarta before the elections next week. Photo: AFP

Tom Allard in Jakarta

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THE cadres of Indonesia's main Islamist party, the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS), came out in force this week, staging the kind of mass rally in Jakarta that the other parties could only dream of.

More than 100,000 turned up at Bung Karno Stadium on Monday, a mightily impressive turnout for a workday and by far the largest rally of any party in the nation's capital.

Chanting Allahu Akhbar - God is Great - as rock bands played and party officials spruiked their message of personal purity and anti-corruption, they gave the occasion a festival feel.

Yellow, white and black flags flew and an ondel-ondel - a giant traditional Jakarta doll directed by two men inside - roamed the expanses of the stadium field. Rather than the usual caricature based on figures from Javanese legend or modern pop culture, the ondel-ondel depicted a pious young woman, complete with hijab covering her head.

As Indonesians prepare to go to the polls next week the fortunes of Islamic parties are being closely watched.
The horrors of the terrorist attacks that gripped the nation from 2000 to 2005, and the rise of hardline Islamic movements in the Middle East, have raised concerns that Indonesia's moderate form of Islam and its secular ideology are under siege.

A former Indonesian president, Abdurrahman Wahid, popularly known as Gus Dur, is among exponents of the view. "Extremist agents" backed by "fantastic amounts of petrodollars" have infiltrated every level of Indonesian society, he contends - from mosques to educational institutions, religious councils and mass Islamic organisations. Right up to the presidential palace itself.

"Since their appearance after the fall of Soeharto, extremist movements have begun to succeed in changing the face of Indonesian Islam to become more aggressive, furious, intolerant and full of hate," he said in the preamble to a paper published by the Libforall Foundation this week.

Yet, despite Gus Dur's alarm, all the polling - and all the internal machinations within parties like PKS - suggests that Islam as a potent political force is on the wane in Indonesia or, at best, treading water.

"There's no reason to be fearful of the rise of Islamism in Indonesia," says Greg Fealy, the Australian National University Indonesianist who monitors Islam closely.

"Overall the polling is showing that Indonesian people are overwhelmingly concerned with economic performance, who can help them put food on the table and help them improve their daily lives."

A recent survey in Kompas, the country's most widely read newspaper, found only 8 per cent of respondents said religion would have a significant influence over who they voted for; 60 per cent said it would have no impact whatsoever.

The most authoritative surveys find that, as a grouping, Islamic parties are polling about 25 per cent, compared with 38 per cent in 2004, when the Western world was at its peak in Indonesia as a consequence of the Iraq invasion.

PKS, a movement that began as a Koranic study group on university campuses and took inspiration from the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, is drawing significantly less support than the 7 per cent it achieved in 2004, when it garnered over 40 seats in the national parliament and three cabinet positions in the government led by President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono.

An ill-conceived electoral advertising campaign that hailed the former dictator Soeharto as a national hero, and promoted the underwhelming performance of PKS ministers and members elected to provincial and district assemblies, is widely attributed to the party's apparently fading prospects.

To be sure it is PKS - which relies on young, educated urbanites for most of its support - that Gus Dur has foremost in his thinking in his polemic against Islamic hardliners taking over Indonesia.

But, while it is true that a couple of its leaders studied in Saudi Arabia, Gus Dur's assertion that it is funded by wealthy Wahhabis from the Arabian peninsula is backed by scant evidence in his report,
except a quote from an unnamed PKS organiser who said that Saudis had provided money to help renovate 11 mosques in a district in Central Java.

Political observers in Indonesia say there is no proof of Saudi backing for PKS, and the party's chairman, Tifatul Sembiring, accused Gus Dur of "just making it up".

"We can be punished for receiving foreign money. Our law says political parties cannot receive foreign money," Mr Sembiring told the Herald.

A political analyst at the state Islamic University, Bachtiar Effendi, said proof that moderate Islam is robust in Indonesia can be found in the evolution of the PKS platform itself.

Its success in 2004 came after it formally dumped the notion of Indonesia adopting the sacred law of Islam, sharia, and becoming a caliphate, Mr Effendi said.

More recently, it has recruited non-Muslim candidates.

"PKS is abandoning its Islamic colour in order to reach a bigger audience," he said.

"Indonesia's social politics are so pluralistic. Anything that goes against Pancasila [the country's secular ideology, pronounced pan-cha-sila] cannot live in Indonesia."

Still, PKS politicians have been the driving force behind a highly controversial anti-pornography bill that outlaws any behaviour that may be sexually stimulating and which appears to give civil groups the power to enforce it.

However, in classic Indonesian fashion the new law is not being enforced.

PKS also got the President to agree to introduce a regulation that prevents the "deviant" Muslim sect Ahmadiyyah from proselytising. Its officials are keen on becoming Dr Yudhoyono's junior coalition party when the presidential elections take place on July 8.

And many of its core supporters still want sharia, a legal system based on the teachings of the Koran.

"We won't do it immediately. We will do it in stages," said Dedi Sutardi, a PKS organiser from South Jakarta.

"But it's not about chopping the hands off thieves. That perception is just Islamophobia. We will allow other religions, but we just want Muslims to be Muslims, not half Muslims."

Mr Sutardi says that would mean closing all shops during Friday prayers, requiring Muslim women to wear the hijab and introducing a "welfare community" based on the prophet Muhammad's teachings.

Source: The Sydney Morning Herald