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Exploring the Social-Political Nexus in Islam: A Comparison of the Middle East and Southeast Asia

Greg Fealy
Emeritus Professor in the Department of Political and Social Change, College of Asia and the Pacific, the Australian National University, Canberra, Australia
Email: greg.fealy@anu.edu.au

Abstract

One of the fulcrums of change in political Islam is the relationship between traditional patterns of Islamic politics, which focus upon the pursuit and wielding of formal power, particularly with the aim of enacting of *shari'a* law, and the more recent emergence of dynamic social spheres of Islamic activism, which emphasise values and moral order and operate with considerable autonomy from Islamic parties. This article explores the nature of the interactions between political and social activism and identifies the ways in which more established form of political Islam are changing as a result of pressure from the social realm. It compares case studies from the Middle East and Southeast Asia, paying particular attention to Muslim Brotherhood and Salafist expressions of social and political activism in both regions. It argues that burgeoning pietistic social activism presents both challenges and opportunities to Islamic political actors, and that failure to engage with these new forces will lead to further marginalisation and the risk of declining relevance.

Keywords: Political Islam, Shari'a Law, Muslim Brotherhood, Salafist

Introduction

Among scholars of political Islam, there is often tension between those seeking broader generalisations and those focused on the particularities of a certain region, party, or movement. The former emphasise the need for comparative study that will allow the identification of common features and trends across different settings, thus enabling deeper conclusions to be drawn about the global nature of political Islam. The latter note the sharp dissimilarities that often exist between Islamic politics in different areas and movements, themselves products of contrasting local historical, cultural, socio-economic, and political

contexts. They warn of the hazards of over-generalisation involving such diverse political phenomena, as loss of granularity can lead to loss of analytical precision. For generalists, the search for unifying threads and coherence can produce insights that transcend a single region or movement and open up the possibility for deeper truths to emerge about how Islam and politics interact across space and time.

Another matter of contention within the literature on political Islam concerns what is to be regarded as ‘politics’ or ‘political’. Are we primarily considering formal politics in which parties contest elections and seek to wield power, or should we have a broader perspective on what constitutes ‘politics’, including social forces beyond those practically engaged in the political system?

In the following article, I draw on both of these discussions – that is, between the general and the local as well as between formal and informal politics – and pursue a selective comparative approach, while also prioritising social activism and exploring its impact on formal politics. The two regions for comparison are the Middle East and Southeast Asia. I draw upon recent scholarly literature from both regions that examine electoral politics and the complex interconnections with the social sphere.

Much of the writing on Middle Eastern political Islam in the past decade has emphasised the dramatic rise and fall in electoral fortunes of Islamic parties. In many Middle Eastern countries, Islamic political movements were on the rise during the 1990s and early 2000s, forming new parties, having proxies stand as independent candidates in elections, or mobilising in ways that gave them influence over other political actors outside their immediate communities. In Turkey, for example, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) won majorities and formed governments from 2002, while its leader has twice won presidential elections since 2008.[1] During the early 2010s, the Arab Spring saw an unprecedented opening of opportunities for Islamists of various types, as multiple nations transitioned to democratic or quasi-democratic systems in the face of mass protests against incumbent autocratic regimes. This process brought many new Islamic parties into power, sometimes in their own right but more commonly in coalition with non-Islamist or non-Muslim parties. To mention several of the most notable instances, the Muslim-Brotherhood’s Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) in Egypt held government from 2012, and Brotherhood-inspired parties such as Ennahda in Tunisia and the Justice and Development Party (PJD) in Morocco led or were significant elements in ruling alliances from 2011. At the same time, a clutch of Salafist parties also quickly formed to contest elections across the region, with

[1] Esposito, Sonn and Voll 2916: 26-49.

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Egypt's al-Nour becoming the most notable, emerging as the second largest party in the 2012 elections. Yet all three Brotherhood-based parties ended the decade vanquished from power; a similar case prevailed for political Salafism. The AKP, though still dominant, is facing its greatest challenge in twenty years in the upcoming 2023 elections, judging by opinion surveys and media reporting. Numerous scholars believe that political Islam is in crisis in the Middle East and are doubtful of its ability to rebound and play any significant role in the near future.[2]

In Southeast Asia, quite different dynamics are at play. There are two Muslim-majority nations with electoral democracies: Indonesia and Malaysia. The region's third Muslim-majority state – Brunei – is a sultanate and effectively an absolute monarchy. In Indonesia, which has the world's largest Muslim population, political Islam has been more stable than in the Middle East, yet is also, arguably, stagnant. While it has not dramatically lost traditional support bases, it has nonetheless failed to attract substantial new constituencies as Brotherhood and Salafist parties did in the Arab-speaking world in the early 2010s. Indonesian Islamic parties have remained steady on about one-third of the total national vote over the five parliamentary elections that have followed the post-1998 transition from authoritarianism. Although steady, the result has disappointed Islamic party leaders, because the proportion of votes garnered is well below that of the only other free and fair election from Indonesia's history, held in 1955, when Islamic parties garnered 44 percent, especially as recent results come at a time of rapid contemporary Islamisation of society. The four Islamic parties that have gained legislative seats since 2009 have been middling parties, with votes ranging from five to 12 percent. All have at some stage been coalition parties in government, though none has played a pivotal role.

In Malaysia, the total vote for overtly Islamic parties has also been steady in recent decades, ranging around 50 to 60 percent. This reflects the continuing trend of Muslim Malays, who comprise about 60 percent of the population, to vote for Islamic parties. However, the allocation of votes between the various Islamically based parties has shifted sharply over time. There are three main parties, each with a different approach to Islamic issues: the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), which was at the centre of every ruling coalition from 1955 till 2018 and combines ethno-nationalism with growing Islamism; the All-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), which has been consistently, and often trenchantly, Islamist and has mainly served in opposition; and, more recently, the pluralist People's Justice Party

[2] Colombo, Matteo. *Lost in Transition: The Muslim Brotherhood in 2022*. Clingendael (Netherlands Institute of International Relations). July 2022.

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(PKR), which has been the main party in two governments since 2018. While the electoral performance of these parties has swung considerably in the last two decades, it remains that case that Malay Muslim votes are critical to securing power.

So, on first appearances, Southeast Asia might appear to have the more influential political Islam. In the Middle East, Islamic parties, with the exception of AKP, have had too little time in power, or lacked effective power when in office, to bring about Islamically inspired change. At least in Indonesia and Malaysia, Islamic parties are reasonably fixed political players in their respective systems: in the former, political Islam is, on most issues, a mildly influential force; in the latter, its position is more central and its capacity to shape legislative and discursive outcomes more clearly in evidence.

But the foregoing reckoning hinges upon election results, and, as already noted, many scholars regard this as not the only, or even the best, gauge of political Islam's clout. Other factors, particularly related to social movements and networks, can also exert effective pressure on governments, Islamic parties, and other state institutions through their ability to mobilise and shape public values for an Islamic end.[3] Both Middle Eastern and Southeast Asian Islamic politics provide abundant examples of community sentiment and groups having the potential to bring Islamic norms and agendas into mainstream politics. Indeed, some scholars argue that the prospects of political Islam depend upon an ability to access and benefit from this social sentiment.[4]

In this article, I examine the trajectories of political Islam in the Middle East and Southeast Asia, paying particular attention to the nexus between formal political institutions and players and informal Islamic movements and networks. There are many ways in which Islamic change can be affected, in addition to through legislation and formal political channels of communication. Often, changes occurring in faith communities will heavily influence developments in Islamic politics. In other words, it may be politics following socio-religious trends rather than the reverse. I argue that the continued growth in digital communications and media-based consumption of Islam will increase the significance of individualised informal discourses and activism for formal Islamic political actors.

Contested Definitions of Political Islam and its Normative Objectives

A core debate among scholars of political Islam revolves around how this particular form of religious politics should be delineated. The classical definition of

[3] Eickelman and Piscatori 2004.

[4] Mandaville 2019.

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political Islam places emphasis upon formal processes and institutions, especially at the state level. Its overriding concern is with the pursuit of power; most particularly, government power. It follows that, according to this definition, the success or failure of political Islam can be measured by the extent to which parties and politicians are able to use elections or negotiate with other forces to secure power or gain influence within the political system. This can take a variety of forms, ranging from being able to contest elections, either as a party or through the use of 'independent candidates' affiliated with Islamic organisations or parties, to becoming the ruling party or the dominant party in a governing coalition. Control over state institutions and resources, the ability to determine government policy, and the ability to shape legislation are all manifestations of effective power, according to this definition of Islamic politics. Very often, this kind of political Islam is preoccupied with bringing Islamic law and principles into the constitutional, legal, economic, and cultural dimensions of state and public life.

There is a growing trend, however, to adopt a broader perspective on what constitutes political Islam, one that studies the more diffuse forms of political activism and which looks at both social spaces and formal political settings. It is the associational networks, which might comprise both informally connected groups or looser, sometimes rather atomised, movements of pietistic individual Muslims who share common views of their faith, that are of interest to this newer approach to political Islam research. The range of these movements and networks can be very diverse. They can be socio-religious organisations which provide preaching, education, or welfare services to their communities. They may be loose congregations, either virtual or physical, that cluster around particular preachers or outreach movements. They could be mosque associations, Muslim youth networks, or Qur'anic discussion groups. But importantly, their primary objective is not political; in fact, many routinely eschew formal politics, viewing it as divisive or corrupting. Nonetheless, they are responsive to political and social events around them and, at particular junctures, can persuade large numbers of people to activate in order to press for a common Islamic objective. This is often not the formalistic concerns of the classical Islamist, regarding the need to Islamise the state – in effect, a top-down process. Rather, these newer social forces do not seek systemic change but rather desire bottom-up, community-based solutions which are driven by individual citizens having a stronger personal Islamic identity and commitment to pious behaviour. The state's role is less to intervene and more to create the correct form of social order and national stability which enables this communal religiosity to flourish. Peter Mandaville suggests that, to capture this broader sense of political Islam, a more appropriate definition is the "study of the diverse ways in

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which those who identify as Muslims in a variety of locations make use of and mobilise symbols and language of Islam around issues of social order, power and authority".[5]

Whether in the Middle East or in Southeast Asia, the past two decades have provided abundant evidence of the capacity for voluntary networks to influence public opinion and sometimes mobilise large numbers of Muslims onto the streets in a manner that is politically significant, and which often leaves parties and Muslim institutions following in their wake rather than leading the agitation. This type of Islamic activism frequently has a high degree of autonomy from formal political processes. Examples of this activism can be seen in the Arab Spring as well as the massive Islamist rallies in the Indonesian capital, Jakarta, in 2016-2017, to remove the non-Muslim governor who was accused of blasphemy.

One other matter warrants discussion before the consideration of Middle Eastern and Southeast Asian case studies: that of the normative objectives of Islamic politics. Scholars such as Olivier Roy have suggested that political Islam should propound a distinct Islamic platform that differentiates it from other political actors.[6] Islamic parties and movements should not just seek and win power but should use the principles of their faith to bring about reform in their nations. This connects with a criticism often made of Islamic parties: they are more concerned with using the symbols and language of religion to attract votes but fail to produce practical, effective policies to deliver security and prosperity to their constituencies. In other words, Islamic parties need to be Islamist. An alternative point of view might be that Islamic parties might also legitimately strive for a pluralistic goal, one that accepts the existing state structure and which is inclusive of other forces in society. If an Islamic party or movement advocates for the status quo using their interpretation of Islamic teachings, is their struggle any less Islamic? Thus, the self-ascribed teleology of Islamic political actors is important.

In Egypt, the Salafist al-Nour party, was preoccupied not only with advocating for its socially and morally conservative agenda but also vouchsafing the material interests of those religious groups who mobilised its community support.[7] Are we to judge this as a failure to adopt the broader agenda which Islam might offer and instead concentrate entirely on satisfying a narrow sectoral interest? Similarly, in Indonesia, the traditionalist National Awakening Party (PKB) serves to protect its

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[5] Mandaville, Peter. *Islam and Politics* (3rd edition). London: Routledge, 2019, 23-24.
[6] Roy 1992.
[7] Al-Anani, Khalil & Maszlee Malik. 'Pious Way to Politics: The Rise of Political Salafism in Post-Mubarak Egypt', *DOMES (Digest of Middle East Studies)*, Vol. 22, no. 1, 16 April 2013, pp. 57-77

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core support base within the massive Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) community, while also giving voice to a pluralist, largely progressive version of Islamic policies. Are its pluralist agenda and patronage focus to be regarded as less worthy of study than that of a party desiring Islamist change? Are such parties to be regarded as less significant in the study of political Islam because their emphasis is not so much change as safeguarding existing privileges? I argue that normatively, both Islamist and pluralist Islamic forces should be recognised as providing legitimate expressions of contrasting Islamic interpretations of faith.

Middle Eastern Socio-Political Activism

Recent studies of trends in the Arab world provide insightful examples of how interaction between formal Islamic institutions and informal social movements produce significant political outcomes. They offer case studies of how networks in the socio-religious sphere give impetus to the efforts of established political players to rise to power.

Some of the most instructive scholarship comes from studies of Egyptian Islamic politics over the past twenty years. Nearly all of the Islamic parties which emerged during the Arab Spring were, in fact, reluctant participants when the mass protests, led by a wide array of civil society groups, gained momentum in February 2011, but did permit and later encourage their possibility. This was true of the two main Islamic forces: the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafists, both of which had been fearful that premature involvement in anti-government activity could lead to state repression.[8]

The Muslim Brotherhood felt that it had much to lose if it was precipitant in its actions. Although relations with the regime of then-president Hosni Mubarak were tense and mistrustful, the Brotherhood had nonetheless been able to gain concessions from the government, which included the ability to have ‘independent’ members in parliament, winning 88 seats (20 percent of the legislature) in 2005. In return, the Brotherhood selectively supported some of Mubarak’s policies, drawing criticism from many anti-regime groups who accused them of tacitly supporting authoritarianism. Nonetheless, once the demonstrations reached their peak, the Brotherhood contributed significantly to the protests as well as to the discourse over what reforms were needed for the political system. The Brotherhood formed its electoral vehicle, the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), in April 2011, soon after Mubarak’s fall. FJP went on to win 47 percent of parliamentary seats in the general election of late 2011, making it by some margin the largest party. The

[8] Wickham 2013; Al-Anani 2016.

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following year, Brotherhood leader Mohammed Morsi was elected president with 52 percent of the vote, though he was subsequently removed by the military with strong public support after just one year in office. The incoming Sisi government launched the most sweeping crackdown on the Brotherhood in the organisation's long and troubled history.[9]

In many ways, the Brotherhood's rapid political rise and fall between 2011 and 2013 appears to be a triumph of traditional Islamist methods. The Brotherhood was established in 1928 and quickly grew to be one of the most influential Islamic groups not only in Egypt but internationally. It was highly disciplined, doctrinally sophisticated, and had the ability to plan long-term and build bases of support in strategic institutions within Egyptian society, such as the professional guilds and associations. It also saw the gaining of power as pivotal to the organisation's Islamisation objectives. Although it was averse to using the term, most scholars regard the Brotherhood as an Islamist organisation, both in ideology and action. So, while the Brotherhood makes an interesting study of Egyptian political Islam, it is not necessarily a fitting example of the new form of socio-religious activism that has been discussed above. This was an organisation with deep historical roots in the Muslim community, a tightly delineated and committed membership, and which advocated for formalist Islamic solutions to the nation's problems.[10]

For our purposes, the more interesting movement regarding social-political blending is the Salafist movement. There are a great many Salafist community groups in Egypt, the oldest of which date back a century, but most took root in the 1970s, aided by generous funding from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states, as well as a lenient attitude from the Egyptian regime. Until 2011, nearly all were firmly apolitical and dedicated to predication, education, and welfare. The larger organisations included the Salafi Call, *Ansar al-Sunnah al-Muhammadiyya*, and *al-Salafiyya al-Madkhaliyya*, but most were small and had loose structures. Notably, Salafist penetration into the Muslim community at least rivalled that of the Brotherhood, and may well have exceeded it. This was due to their astute use of television and radio preaching; charismatic, often Gulf-trained Salafist clerics were among Egypt's most popular preachers from 2000. Salafist teachings gained traction in both poor and middle-class communities, due to perceptions of possessing high Islamic authenticity as well as for providing clear guidelines on what was permissible for Muslims. Trust in Salafism was also helped by public perceptions that, unlike the Brotherhood, the Salafists had not compromised their

[9] Hamdi 2015; Wickham 2013;
[10] Obaid 2017.

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principles by doing deals with the Mubarak regime. This was especially attractive to younger, better educated urban Muslims as well as longer established Salafist communities in Alexandria and coastal regions. These were the types of Muslims who were not necessarily locked into following a particular organisation, as were members of the Brotherhood, but rather saw their religious activities in a more personalised framework in which they were free to 'consume' the teachings of different Salafist leaders.[11]

The most striking element of what happened in early 2011 is that an array of Salafist groups suddenly decided to embrace political activity, despite having for so long condemned it. Many Salafist preachers who had previously denounced democracy as contrary to Islamic law and warned against rebellion against the state, now hastily revised their views and endorsed democratic engagement. Major Salafist groups formed their own parties: Salafist Call established the al-Nour Party; Cairo-based Salafists founded the al-Asala Party; and the former terrorist group Gama'a al-Islamiyya created the Bina wal-Tanmia Party. None of these parties had policy platforms prior to February 2011, but all quickly produced programs advocating for comprehensive *shari'a* application, gender segregation, and strict rules on attire, especially for women. How can this abrupt change of attitude be explained? Scholars have advanced various theories, but perhaps the most plausible is that Salafists felt that if they did not join the surge for democratic reforms then their movement would be marginalised and not be able to provide moral guidance to the Muslim community. Many Salafists defended their move in terms of protecting the Egyptian Muslim identity from irreligious foreign influences that they feared would sweep in with democratisation. [12] As one of al-Nour's spokesmen declaimed, "We had to enter politics to protect Egypt from secular and liberal groups that want to destroy Islamic identity."[13] Many Salafist leaders felt uncomfortable with such a sharp U-turn on political engagement, but accepted the argument that winning a share of political power was the best way to further the Salafist ends.

The initial electoral success of Salafist parties shocked most observers and certainly the Salafist leaders themselves. These parties lacked efficient organisations and experience in campaigning, particularly when compared to the campaign-hardened and disciplined Brotherhood party FJP. Nonetheless, the Salafists emerged as the second largest group in parliament. The dominant Salafist

[11] Karagiannis 2018; Hoigilt and Nome 2014.
[12] Hoiglit and Nome 2014; Azaola-Piazza and de Larramendi 2021.
[13] Al-Anani and Malik, 2013.

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party was al-Nour, which won 107 parliamentary seats, second only to the FJP. Moreover, the al-Nour-led Islamic Block of Salafist parties won 123 seats (28 percent of the national vote). But as with the FJP, the Salafist political blossoming was short lived, though less traumatic than that experienced by the Brotherhood. Al-Nour supported the military's overthrow of the Morsi government and was quiet as thousands of Brotherhood members were jailed and the organisation itself banned. In the 2015 election, al-Nour's vote slumped to just 11 seats; its political future looks bleak under the Sisi regime. Most other Salafist parties boycotted the 2015 elections in protest at restrictive regulations and were banned by the Supreme Court in 2017. Many of the Salafists who dallied with practical politics between 2011 and 2015 have now returned to their community work and concede that veering into the political domain was a mistake.[14]

An important point to note in discussing the success of Salafist parties in Egypt in 2011 was that much of their support come from outside of congregations directly involved with Salafist groups. Many voters who chose Salafist parties were spread across the broader community and were active not in political spaces but social and religio-cultural spaces. They were familiar with Salafist preachers through electronic media and admired their uncompromising emphasis on purification of the faith. Many of these voters were preoccupied with their own pietism, repulsed by the corruption and immorality that was so rampant in Egypt. Many of these same people had partaken in the early 2011 protests; Salafism appeared to offer a more ethical path than that presented by many other parties. The looseness and adaptability of this pro-Salafist movement turned out to be an asset in the quickly-moving events of 2011-12, and helped make them politically potent. The lines of communication that offered a measure of cohesion were similar to those that Salafists had built over many years in their religious outreach. Thus, it was an anomalous movement compared to most other electoral contestants in Egypt.

We can find several similar patterns in other Middle Eastern states with both Brotherhood and Salafist parties. The Muslim Brotherhood has offshoot parties across the region, most of blossomed immediately after the Arab Spring, then experienced marginalisation over the following decade. Perhaps the best known is the Ennahda Party in Tunisia. Its origins can be traced to the Islamic Tendency Movement, which was founded in 1981, before being transformed into Ennahda in early 2011. The party won more legislative seats that any other party at the 2011 election (37 percent of the vote and 89 of 217 seats). Lacking a majority, Ennahda

[14] Azaola-Piazza and de Larramendi 2021; Karagiannis 2018.

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formed a coalition government with non-Islamist parties, with Ennahda's secretary-general, Hamadi Jebali, becoming prime minister. However, Ennahda was forced to surrender government leadership to its coalition partners as Tunisia confronted worsening economic and security problems. The party's vote fell to 28 percent in the 2014 election and then to just 20 percent in 2019.[15] Finally, in 2021, Tunisia's president staged a coup and dismantled the democratic system. This has left Ennahda, along with most other parties, sidelined, with a tarnished record in government and no short-term prospects for rebounding in an autocratic setting.

In Morocco, the Brotherhood-inspired Justice and Development Party (usually acronymised as PJD) had its antecedents in various Islamist movements stretching back to the 1960s but took its present name and form in the late 1990s. At the 2002 and 2007 elections, the party gained about 12 percent of the vote, before emerging as the largest party at the 2011 and 2017 elections, at which it won 23 percent and 28 percent respectively. PJD leaders served as prime ministers of the coalition governments between 2011 and 2021, but had only limited freedom to act, given that effective power resided with the king and the military. PJD suffered a humiliating defeat at the 2019 elections, ending up with just 3 percent of the vote and 12 parliamentary seats.[16] As with Ennahda, PJD now has an uncertain future.

Both Ennahda and PJD, while loosely derived from Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, also owed much of their short-lived electoral success to an ability to attract Muslim voters from outside communities that were committed to Ikhwani principles. PJD, for example, drew strong support for their platform of socially conservative political reform within an 'Islamic framework' by emphasising anti-corruption and maintaining democracy.[17] Ennahda, as well, attracted intellectuals and preachers from a broad swathe of the Islamic community, many of whom were able to reach into corners of the electorate that wanted Islamically-informed change but not necessarily a sweeping Islamisation of the state.

Southeast Asian Socio-Political Activism

Some of the Middle Eastern phenomena described above can also be discerned in Southeast Asian political Islam, especially in Indonesia and Malaysia. Both nations have rapidly modernising and urbanising societies with very high levels of digital connectedness and swift change in Islamic consumption patterns. These factors are driving the emergence of new Islamic sub-cultures which mainly

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[15] Pfeiffer 2019; Cavatorto 2018.
[16] Zemni 2013.
[17] Mandaville 2019: 190.

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revolve around aspirational pietistic identities. Although this pious identity formation primarily occurs in the social sphere as an individual expression of renewed commitment to faith, it is also accessible to political leaders and entrepreneurs who see the potential for politicising a well-resourced, media savvy, and electorally valuable section of the population. Although these aspirational pietists can be progressive, much more commonly they are conservative. I will begin with Indonesia and will focus predominantly on the so-called '212' protests that took place in late 2016 and early 2017.

Few events in contemporary Indonesian Islam have possessed the symbolic or political power of the '212' protests during the campaign for the 2017 gubernatorial election in Jakarta.[18] The largest of this series of demonstrations took place on 2 December 2016 (hence the title – the 2nd day of the 12th month), drawing drew a crowd commonly estimated to be between 500,000 and 750,000 people to the streets of Central Jakarta. This protest is likely the largest of Indonesia's history. The demonstrations were sparked by the allegedly blasphemous remarks made by the incumbent governor, Basuki 'Ahok' Tjahaja Purnama, regarding verse 51 (*al-Ma'idah*) of the Qur'an, which concerns non-Muslims leading Muslims. Ahok, an outspoken Christian of Chinese heritage who had long been a target for Islamist groups in the capital, had public approval ratings in the high 60s at the start of the campaign, but this plummeted after his supposed blasphemy in September 2016 and the ensuing media storm.[19] The sheer magnitude of the 212 demonstrations shook Indonesia's political establishment, especially the government of President Joko Widodo, which had always regarded itself as vulnerable to Islamist attacks and was eager to defuse an increasingly dangerous situation. In response to protestor demands, Ahok was charged with blasphemy, although the gubernatorial election campaigns continued. Ahok was ultimately defeated in the runoff election in April 2017 before being found guilty of blasphemy and sentenced to two years in jail in May 2017. He was also soundly defeated in the gubernatorial race by his main rival who had cultivated Islamist support during the campaign.

[18] There were actually numerous names used for these series of demonstrations. The title given to them by the organisers was *Aksi Bela Islam* (Action to Defend Islam), though individual demonstrations were usually known by their dates (such as 4 November protests being referred to as 411, and so on).

[19] It is moot whether Ahok actually committed blasphemy by referring to the al-Ma'idah verse of the Qur'an regarding non-Muslims leading Muslims. Ahok claimed his remarks merely repeated the view of a famous Indonesian ulama and many of the expert witnesses who advised the police doubted the comments were insulting to Muslims. For a good account of the blasphemy case and trial, see Peterson 2020.

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Several aspects of this series of events are notable for the context of this article. The first is that this unprecedented mobilisation of people was undertaken primarily by Islamist civil society organisations. The four key groups were the Islamic Defenders' Front (FPI), a traditionalist vigilante group with a long history of street protests and direct action on so-called 'Islamic morality issues'; *Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia*, which was, at the time, thought to be the world's biggest branch of this transnational organisation; *Wahdah Islamiyah*, Indonesia's biggest Salafist organisation, which usually eschewed politics; and a small conservative Islamist intellectual organisation called MIUMI, which was little known among the general public. Officially, most of Indonesia's main Islamic organisations, including NU and Muhammadiyah, disapproved of the protests and urged their members to stay away. Muslim politicians and their parties, though present and sometimes prominent in the protest events, also played little role in organising them or directing their outcomes. Hence, Indonesia's biggest demonstration in living memory was organised without direct formal support from many of the political and religious organisations that are regarded as the backbone of national Islamic life.[20]

From where, then, did the hundreds of thousands of protesters come? While research data on this matter is limited, certain elements of the answer are reasonably clear. To begin with, many tens of thousands of NU and Muhammadiyah members disregarded the pleas of their leaders and took to the streets. Large numbers went so far as to carry flags or wear clothing displaying NU or Muhammadiyah symbols, in defiance of instructions not to bring their organisation's 'attributes' to the protests. When asked why they had come, most replied that they were convinced of Ahok's blasphemy and felt compelled to defend the dignity of their faith.[21] The large turnout of Muhammadiyah and especially NU members was an embarrassment to the leadership of both bodies, suggesting they underestimated the strength of sentiment within their membership or were unable to persuade their masses against protesting. In fact, reports from across NU's and Muhammadiyah's vast educational networks suggested that social media played a key role in convincing members of Ahok's guilt and the need for mass action. This became a revealing instance of the relative weakness of intra-organisational official communications to counter the waves of information surging across the internet. Many NU and Muhammadiyah members formed their views on the Ahok case not based on the considered guidance of the *ulama* who led their organisations, but rather directly from social media sources as well as the popular preachers who

[20] Fealy 2016; Mietzner and Muhtadi 2018.

[21] Interviews with the author during the 212 rally, 2 December 2016, Jakarta.

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dominated that domain. In the growing contest for authority between senior organisational *ulama* on the one hand and 'independent' *ulama*, preachers, and activists on the other, the latter proved far more effective. Among the many things that the 212 movement symbolised was the difficulty for large, established organisations to command the allegiance of their members in the face of potent new media discourses which play to religious sentiment, spontaneous emotional responses, and often loaded agitational language.

A second element to the answer is that a broad array of pietistic civil society groups became involved in 212 to a degree not before seen. Prior to the anti-Ahok protests, demonstrations which had what might be termed an 'Islamist' agenda, such as championing *shari'a* law implementation, objecting to proposed visits to Indonesia of 'immoral' artists or liberal intellectuals, or declaring solidarity with endangered Muslim communities abroad, might draw crowds from several thousand to several tens of thousands, most of whom came from committed Islamist groups. FPI, HTI and FUI, as well as Islamist parties such as the Brotherhood-inspired Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) and the NU-based United Development Party (PPP), were often prominently involved. But with 212, a much broader spectrum of groups were mobilised, either at their own initiative or in response to external prompting. These included supposedly apolitical *majelis dakwah* (proselytization groups) such as *Majelis Rasalullah* and *Majelis Nurul Mustofa*; a myriad of mosque study groups, many organised through official Indonesian Mosque Council channels; and diverse *majelis taklim* (informal Islamic studies groups or institutes), mainly from Jakarta and West Java. The role of social media was, once again, crucial to this mass mobilisation. WhatsApp, Facebook , Twitter, and Telegram were all vectors for millions of posts and messages, involving widespread discussion regarding the anti-Ahok protests. Many of those involved in 212 admitted it was the first time in their life that they had attended a major political protest.

What gave 212 such striking impact was its ability to galvanise so many sectors of Indonesia's Islamic community. For decades, the unleashing of Islam's potential power had fired the imaginations of Islamists while also stoking fears among nationalists, non-Muslims, and pluralist Muslims. The anti-Ahok events had turned the shimmering hope/ominous spectre into reality. And it had been done primarily in social spaces using associational networks, facilitated by digital communications. Islamic parties and mainstream Islamic organisations had been bypassed, ignored, or reduced to facilitating. For political Islam in Indonesia, which had for so long been forced to live with mediocre electoral outcomes, 212 was a sign of what could be.

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The success of 212, however, would prove ephemeral. Within months of helping to vanquish Ahok, a candidate who had seemed unbeatable at the start of the campaign, 212's momentum stalled. Splits appeared within the leadership group over how to consolidate the movement and give it long-term substance. More seriously for 212 leaders, the Widodo government began a systematic crackdown on key figures and groups within the movement. HTI was banned in July 2017; police launched investigations into supposedly illegal behaviour by prominent Islamists, resulting in many being jailed and others quietly agreeing to cease dissent; and Islamist public servants came under pressure to prove their pro-government commitments.[22] By the time of the 2019 elections, the hoped-for 'flow through' effects of the anti-Ahok mobilisation for political Islam had largely evaporated. The pro-Islamist presidential candidate, Prabowo Subianto, did garner 51 percent of the national Muslim vote but was defeated by the overwhelming non-Muslim vote (97 percent) against him – undoubtedly a legacy of non-Muslim anxiety over the sectarian forces unleashed by 212.[23]

So while the 212 movement stands as an illuminating case study of the power of the informal public sphere to shape opinion and move people to action, it is also a salutary instance of the difficulty Islamic parties face in harnessing such sentiment at election time. The 212 movement was a lightning bolt response to a blasphemy case, which Indonesian history tells us always arouses high levels of public passion. But once the perceived offender, Ahok, had been defeated and jailed, what remained of the 212 agenda? Indeed, it seems that many Muslims endorsed 212 primarily as means of helping to remove and punish Ahok, and did not subscribe the movement's efforts to pursue a more traditional Islamist program. Islamic parties' attempts to tap into the spirit of 212 for the 2019 election failed to realise that Muslim sentiment and preoccupations had moved beyond the concerns of 2016-17 and were likely more framed by broader criteria such as economic performance, social order, and security, albeit in an Islamically moral setting.

Malaysia provides an interesting contrast to that of Indonesia. Malaysia has not been subject to a massive religious mobilisation on the scale of 212 which re-ordered politics either by civil society action or state reaction (that is, by bringing down a powerful incumbent or prompting state repression). Also, like Indonesia, the total Islamic vote at Malaysian elections is quite stable, even though the proportion of votes gained by major Islamic parties has, at times, shifted sharply. Most Malaysian Muslims vote for a party that is, in one way or another, Islamic, be it

[22] Fealy 2020.

[23] Indikator Politik Indonesia 2019: 41.

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the Malay nationalist Islamism of PAS or, increasingly, UMNO, or the more inclusive and pluralist Islamic agenda of PKR. In Indonesia, only about one third of Muslim voters choose overtly Islamic parties.

One growing point of convergence between Indonesia and Malaysia is the mounting importance of social networking and preaching spaces to the fortunes of Islamic parties. Just as middle-class pietisation is generating quickly evolving new discourses and realms for Islamic activism in Indonesia, so to can this phenomenon be seen in Malaysia. Many of the dynamics are the same, with a broadly conservative, often Ikhwani or Salafi-hued, discourse and behavioural patterns, but also a significant minority of relatively more moderate, if not progressive, orientation. One major difference between the new nations is the far greater clout of official *ulama* and the powerful religious bureaucracy in Malaysia compared to that of Indonesia. Many decades of *shari'a*-isation of laws and state-sponsored Islamic programs have led to the rapid expansion of institutions with the responsibility to administer and monitor this sector. Singaporean scholar Norshahril Saat has argued that such is the influence of Malaysia's 'official *ulama*' that they have achieved a high level of 'state capture', evident in their ability to press their will on the nation's political elite.[24] The inability of successive recent governments to resist the demands from their bureaucracy for further Islamisation, which are often amplified by civil society forces, has been especially apparent.[25]

Several Malaysia civil society groups warrant mention for the influence that they wield within broader sections of Muslim society and with particular Islamic parties. These are the Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia (ABIM), IKRAM, and Malaysian Muslim Association (ISMA). ABIM has been a seminal force in Malaysia Islamic revivalism, particularly in spreading and popularising Muslim Brotherhood-inspired thinking and organisational methods from the early 1970s. Historically, ABIM leaders were recruited into both the governing UMNO party and the oppositional PAS, but in recent elections, ABIM has been more closely aligned to the Anwar Ibrahim-led PKR, becoming a major source of new leadership for the party. IKRAM shares the progressivism of ABIM and at the recent general election was also supportive of PKR and its *Pakatan Harapan* (Hope Alliance). ABIM and IKRAM's alignment with PKR is noteworthy, as Anwar's party, though deriving much of its vote from Malay Muslims, emphasises inclusion and pluralism. ISMA, the most conservative and recently formed of the groups (1997), is closer to PAS and its *Perikatan Nasional* (National Alliance). It directly attacks *Pakatan Harapan* as

[24] Saat 2017.

[25] Saat and Alatas 2022.

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supporting anti-Muslim, anti-Malay interests, and of also promoting leftism and moral decadence. One noted commentator observed that ISMA has succeeded in pushing PAS further to the right in recent years, as the party sought to gain votes from ISMA's avid support base.[26]

Final Reflections

This exploration of the various ways in which the social sphere and its accompanying activism can impact Islamic politics has emphasised the multi-faceted nature of these interactions. In some ways, new forms of social activism pose a threat to long-established traditions of conducting political Islam. They tend to resist collective organisation and adherence to formal institutional agendas, which parties would regard as building blocks of disciplined and successful political movements. But in other ways, social activists can provide new ideas and impetus for the regeneration of outmoded Islamic political agendas. As noted, many Muslims inhabiting these new social spaces have different priorities to earlier generations: they are less wedded to formal, top-down, state-driven approaches, and more disposed towards the expression of individual pietism and the creation of a broadly moral framework within which Muslims can live in a religiously safe and conscientious manner. Islamic parties face both a challenge and an opportunity in engaging with these social realms: meaningful involvement requires at least some measure of change to long-standing preoccupations but to do so is to open the possibility for substantial growth in support and longer-term electoral rewards.

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[26] Hew 2022.

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