Will religious sectarianism change Indonesian foreign policy?

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Earlier this month, Islamist groups held a major rally in Jakarta to call on Muslims to shun political parties [1] and candidates that had backed the now-imprisoned former Jakarta governor Basuki Tjahja Purnama, or Ahok. The rally was yet another reminder that religious sectarianism still looms large over Indonesia’s presidential race.

As we head into the final five months before the election, it’s worth asking whether religious sectarianism will also shape Indonesian foreign policy after the victor is declared.

Presidential contender Prabowo Subianto found himself in hot water [2] at home last month for implying that he had no problem with Australia’s mooted plan to move its embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. President Joko Widodo’s running mate, Ma’aruf Amin, also recently suggested that Indonesia’s ‘middle way’ Islam [3] (wasatiyyah Islam)—characterised by neither liberal nor radical religious thought—should be promoted internationally.

But there’s been no call for an explicitly ‘Islamic’ foreign policy—where religious considerations dominate policy processes and goals—in the campaign platform of either presidential candidate. If anything, the two camps both reiterate [4] the fundamental tenets of Indonesia’s ‘independent and active’ foreign policy. The difference between the two lies in how they intend to implement it.

Prabowo’s foreign policy platform is currently underdeveloped. He plans to restore Indonesian leadership and the country’s role on the international stage, assist in Palestinian independence efforts, accelerate negotiations over maritime boundaries, improve protection of Indonesians overseas and involve the country’s diaspora in advancing the national interest.

But these promises are offered without any elaboration, which is hardly surprising. During his first run against Jokowi in 2014, Prabowo stated that his foreign policy would simply continue the policies of former president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono.

As the incumbent, Jokowi’s foreign policy platform is more concrete, but it is underwhelming in its...
vision and riddled with jargon. He calls for strengthening Indonesian leadership in multilateral forums from ASEAN to the United Nations, and for boosting the country’s position as an archipelagic state and maritime fulcrum between the Indian and Pacific oceans.

The platform also lists pre-existing initiatives—from maritime to humanitarian and culinary diplomacy—and focuses on low-hanging fruit such as protection of citizens and economic cooperation. But there’s hardly any mention of Indonesia’s global role through the G20, middle-power diplomacy, or democratic values projection that characterised the Yudhoyono era.

Significantly, the platform also includes the Palestine issue along with the call to promote Indonesia’s ‘middle way’ Islam. While that won’t transform the country’s foreign policy, it gives a nod to the growing complexities of domestic religious sectarianism that both Jokowi and Prabowo have had to navigate recently.

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There is precedent, after all, for such involvement. In the mid- to late 2000s, the foreign ministry under Hassan Wirajuda engaged key Islamic groups like Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama to promote Indonesia’s ‘bridge building’ role between ‘the West and the rest’ through global interreligious dialogues.

One study notes that promoting some Islamic groups that toe the state’s line in foreign policy denies credence to other more radical groups as the ‘voice’ of Indonesian Islam. Policymakers considered that approach useful when the domestic debate over moderate and radical Islam polarised after the 2002 Bali bombings. Similar debates have now returned in the wake of the banning of Hizb ut-Tahrir Indonesia and the downfall of Ahok.

Palestine could be one issue that the foreign ministry could use to engage domestic Islamic groups. The ministry has sought to raise Palestine in various platforms over the past year and was reportedly holding back on signing the bilateral free trade deal with Australia over its Israeli embassy review.

Global interreligious dialogues are another way to engage domestic religious groups on foreign policy. The ministry’s 2014–2019 strategic planning document mentions interreligious dialogues as one of Indonesia’s soft-power platforms but doesn’t provide any specific plan of action. The attempts to facilitate the Afghan peace talks and the ‘World Muslim Scholars’ high-level consultation (both held in May 2018) show how the model might be expanded.

While Palestine could still be a sensitive pressure point and Indonesia might push for more interreligious dialogues, its foreign policy is unlikely to be driven just by religious concerns. An ‘independent and active’ stance and faith in multilateral institutions will continue to underpin Indonesian foreign policy.

But the changing domestic political landscape means that the foreign policy establishment in Jakarta might have to spend more time looking inward that outward. An inward-looking Indonesian foreign policy isn’t going to provide the best response to the growing strategic flux in the Indo-Pacific.

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notes: https://books.google.com/books/about/Transnational_Islamic_Actors_and_Indones.html?id=mcI0CwAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=kp_read_button#v=onepage&q&f=false
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Afghan peace talks: https://www.voanews.com/a/indonesia-to-host-trilateral-afghan-peace-meeting/4378410.html