

# The Intersection between Islamic Populism and Radicalism in Indonesia: The Rise and Fall of Aksi Bela Islam Movement

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# The Intersection between Islamic Populism and Radicalism in Indonesia: The Rise and Fall of Aksi Bela Islam Movement

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## ABSTRACT

This article discusses the role of radical Islamist groups – the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI), and the Salafis - in spearheading the populist Islamist 212 Movement. It examines why they were such effective forces in leading the movement and why their role diminished over time, which contributed to the decline of the movement. Drawing on political process theory and the literature on populism, this article argues that the movement faltered because they could no longer play an instrumental role due to the unsupportive structure of political opportunities, disorganized social movement, less relevant framing, and greater social and political pressure to the social movement.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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Islamist populism in Indonesia as a form of social movement has generated much attention from scholars. In part, this interest stems from the rise of populism in other parts of the world as exemplified by the election of Donald Trump in the US, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Boris Johnson in the UK, and Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines. In Indonesia, scholars have focused on the Islamist populists capable of exerting their influence socially and politically disproportionate to their number. The Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI), and the Salafis, which were peripheral actors in Indonesian politics, were capable of mobilizing hundreds of thousands Muslims from across the spectrum in a series of rallies, which included the biggest rally in Indonesian history on 2 December 2016,<sup>1</sup> attended by an estimated 500,000 people.<sup>2</sup> This was almost twice the number of participants who turned up to the second largest rally in the Indonesian history on 19 September 1945 (300,000 people). They did not stop in organizing these series of events that aimed at destroying the gubernatorial candidacy of Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok), a Chinese-Indonesian, who is also a Christian. But, as this article will show, they also aimed at further, broader targets, including tackling economic inequality “between Muslims and Chinese-Indonesians”<sup>3</sup> and greater implementation of sharia provisions. Hence, their endeavours constitute a social movement.

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44 Much of the existing literature is dedicated to discussing the genesis of this move-  
45 ment through the lens of political identity, exploring the link between rising intolerance  
46 and rising populism. Greg Fealy, for example, argues that the populist protests against  
47 Jakarta governor Ahok in 2016 were the manifestation of deepening Islamic conserva-  
48 tism in Indonesia. The event's organizer, the National Movement to Guard the MUI  
49 Fatwa (GNPF-MUI), a coalition of Islamist groups, not only demanded that the legal  
50 authorities in Indonesia prosecute and jail Ahok for allegedly violating the blasphemy  
51 law, but they also sought to change "the Constitution to oblige Muslims to follow  
52 Islamic law, proposing a ban on non-Muslim leaders in majority Muslim communities,  
53 greater implementation of sharia provisions and the nomination of political candidates  
54 for executive office who are sympathetic to Islamist objectives."<sup>4</sup>

55 Another argument often advanced is that social injustice, the feeling of being alien-  
56 ated from the prevailing social and political system, was behind the rise of such a  
57 movement. Ian Wilson argues that resentment among the alienated people in Jakarta,  
58 especially the economically marginalized, rose following Ahok's urban eviction policy.<sup>5</sup>  
59 This policy was popular among middle-class Jakartans as it contributed to the easing  
60 of traffic and reduced flooding that had been a regular problem. However, it resulted  
61 in forced displacement of poor people, who lived next to Jakarta's rivers or on illegal  
62 lands. The poor then stood up against Ahok after vigilante groups, including FPI,  
63 manipulated their resentment to gain political legitimacy.<sup>6</sup> In similar vein, Abdil Mughis  
64 Mudhoffir contends that economic insecurity left individuals vulnerable to manipulation  
65 by populist movements seeking to attain their social and political objectives.<sup>7</sup>

66 Another strain in the literature looks at the state response to Islamist populism,  
67 often from a critical perspective. These scholars tend to argue that the state under  
68 the Joko Widodo government has been too harsh in its response, hence the practice  
69 has reduced the quality of Indonesia's democracy. For example, Thomas Power contends  
70 that Joko Widodo (Jokowi) resorted to selective repression, accommodating Muslims  
71 who supported the government while repressing those who opposed it, including the  
72 Islamist populists.<sup>8</sup> Marcus Mietzner concurs that the state in the Jokowi era fought  
73 Muslim populists' illiberalism with illiberalism, which resulted in democratic decon-  
74 solidation in Indonesia.<sup>9</sup> A final approach looks at the intersection of populism and  
75 prevailing oligarchical trends. Here Vedi R. Hadiz posits that the Islamist middle class  
76 in Indonesia has not developed well, so Islamists have been vulnerable to co-optation  
77 by oligarchs who promote right wing illiberal agendas.<sup>10</sup>

78 Despite the growing interest of scholars in discussing rising Islamist populism, few  
79 have done so using a social movement framework. This article seeks to fill this gap  
80 by utilizing social movement theory and a process tracing approach to chart the rise  
81 and fall of the 212 movement. It examines why this social movement was formed and  
82 also why FPI, HTI and the Salafis were such an effective force in mobilizing Muslims  
83 from across the Islamic ideological spectrum. FPI, HTI and the Salafis are labelled  
84 Islamists here because, borrowing Greg Fealy's definition, they wished "to make Islamic  
85 law and values a central part of public life and the structure of the state."<sup>11</sup>

86 This article also pushes back against the conventional view in the literature that  
87 ideology is the ultimate driver of social movement.<sup>12</sup> The Aksi Bela Islam Movement  
88 case study shows that the driver is more complex. Thus, this article argues that ide-  
89 ology alone was not sufficient to trigger people's participation. Rather, it contends that

90 the initial mobilization was the result of the interplay of ideology, skilful framing by  
91 religious entrepreneurs, and the structure of political opportunity. Over time, however,  
92 some of these same factors, notably changes to the structure of political opportunities  
93 following the demonstrations and changes in framing, impeded the movement's  
94 long-term sustainability and viability.

95 The political process perspective was originally developed to examine Western  
96 democracies. This raises the question whether this perspective can help explain social  
97 movements in non-Western democratic, hybrid or authoritarian regimes, including  
98 Indonesia. Although most scholars have utilized the political process perspective in  
99 democratic settings,<sup>13</sup> Kurt Schock shows in his work on the Philippines and Burma/  
100 Myanmar that it also a useful tool for analyzing social movement mobilization and  
101 outcomes in Southeast Asia.<sup>14</sup> He argues that the political environments facilitating,  
102 constraining, or shaping social movements can exist anywhere, including in  
103 non-democratic regimes. This article will add another Southeast Asian case-study. It  
104 will chart the rise and fall of a social movement in Indonesia, which is formally cat-  
105 egorized as a non-Western democratic regime.

106 Doug McAdam provides a useful framework to analyse the rise of a social movement.<sup>15</sup>  
107 He argues that there are four factors. The first one is the structure of political oppor-  
108 tunities, which refers to social processes that help structure and restructure existing  
109 power relationships between the social movement and the government. Social processes,  
110 such as urbanization and industrialization, might inflame social and political grievances  
111 that can provide fertile ground for political contention. However, a favourable opportunity  
112 structure is not sufficient; it needs to be supported by other factors to make the move-  
113 ment successful. The second factor is organization. The movement must have a structure  
114 and a supporting network or organization, and this organization must have four resources:  
115 engaged members, interpersonal rewards that provide incentives for members to be active  
116 in the organization, communication networks, and capable leaders. Third, framing or  
117 cognitive liberation, which refers to "a transformation of consciousness within a signif-  
118 icant segment of the aggrieved population", is also necessary.<sup>16</sup> The two previous factors  
119 [political opportunities and organization] provide "structural potential" for successful  
120 social or political actions. This framing serves as "a mediating link",<sup>17</sup> helping people  
121 transform the potential social movement into an actual one. Finally, the social movement  
122 pressures the social and political system, and it will draw a social and political response  
123 from outside parties. When the movement is seen as socially and politically strong,  
124 outside parties, especially the government, will likely either embrace or at least, will not  
125 challenge the movement. In addition, responses from the external forces will vary as  
126 some elites might see the social movement as either a threat or an opportunity. Whether  
127 the movement is sustainable depends on the capacity of the movement's figures and  
128 participants in resisting the opposition to the movement.

## 130 **The Rise of Aksi Bela Islam Movement**

### 132 ***Structure of Political Opportunities***

134 Scholars generally define the structure of political opportunities as "the nature of  
135 resources and constraints external to the challenging group."<sup>18</sup> They explain that the

variable of these external resources and constraints challenging a social movement ranges from “volatile” political opportunities, such as issue salience and public opinion, to “stable” political opportunities, such as institutional structure in stable polities.<sup>19</sup> This section discusses the volatile element of political opportunities, namely political polarization as social processes that paved the way for the rise of the Aksi Bela Islam social movement.

Political polarization began in the run-up to the 2014 presidential election that pitted the supporters of presidential candidate Joko Widodo against rival candidate Prabowo Subianto. After Jokowi was elected president, the polarization continued as Prabowo’s supporters, including Islamists, mobilized in opposition to Jokowi through a variety of mediums from Friday sermons at mosques to posts on social media. They targeted not only the president, but also his allies, including Ahok, Jokowi’s former deputy when the latter served as Jakarta governor between 2012 and 2014. One of Jokowi’s opponents was the Islamic Defenders front (FPI), a vigilante group known for anti-vice raids on bars and clubs that sell alcohol. They have participated regularly in demonstrations for Islamic causes such as protesting the treatment of the Rohingya in Myanmar, highlighting Islamophobia in India, calling for banning pornography, or supporting political candidates that are sympathetic to their goals and worldview. In the 2016 protests against Ahok, when he was governor of Jakarta, they used inflammatory rhetoric to aggravate anti-Chinese resentment to build support for removing him.

FPI and other anti-Jokowi activists, especially the Islamists, found opportunity to channel their resentment through a social movement after Ahok gave a public speech, stating that “Jakartans had been deceived using Surah Al-Maidah” in the run-up to the gubernatorial election set to take place in early 2017.<sup>20</sup> In this speech, Ahok, who is non-Muslim, actually warned Jakartans not to be easily deceived by people who misused the surah for their own political gain. However, the speech ignited controversy because the verse he mentioned, Surah Al Maidah 51, has been the subject of disagreement by Indonesian Muslim leaders. If taken literally, this verse prevents Muslims from electing non-Muslim leaders, saying that if Muslims eventually choose non-Muslims to be their leaders, they will become part of the non-Muslim community. However, some Muslim leaders have argued that non-Muslims consist of different categories of people. The scholar Quraish Shihab, who subscribes to this latter interpretation, explains that the ban is supposed to be directed only toward non-Muslims who are against Islam and who are sympathetic to the enemies of Islam.<sup>21</sup>

The issue of Ahok mentioning Surah Al Madiyah 51 came to a head due to a deliberate misinformation campaign. After a Jakarta government official uploaded a video of the speech to the government’s official YouTube account, an academic, Buni Yani, who supported Ahok’s rivals in the 2017 election, Anies Baswedan and Sandiaga Uno, edited the video clip of the speech on his Facebook account on 6 October 2016, to make it sound as if Ahok was saying that Jakartans were “...lied to ... by Surah Al-Maidah.” Buni Yani added a provocative sentence in the caption: “It seems that there is something bad about this speech.” This Facebook posting went viral. Tens of thousands of people shared the video to their networks,<sup>22</sup> and it eventually made headlines in the mainstream media. Indonesian media, including popular news television stations TV One and Metro TV, covered and organized public discussions on their television programs about the event every day.<sup>23</sup> On 7 October 2016, several

182 people claiming to be Muslim figures, such as Novel Chaidir Hasan Bamukmin from  
183 FPI, Khairul Sakti Lubis from Muhammadiyah's Youth Front, and Muslim cleric Irena  
184 Handono reported Ahok to police for allegedly violating the blasphemy law.<sup>24</sup>

185 The anti-Jokowi camps quickly capitalized on this momentum to undermine Ahok's  
186 political position. Several Muslim figures, who claimed to represent Islam, organized  
187 meetings at the Indonesian Council of Ulema (MUI), to discuss the controversy stem-  
188 ming from Ahok's statement. In the MUI meetings led by then MUI chairman Ma'ruf  
189 Amin in early October 2016, the ulema concluded that Ahok had blasphemed Islam.  
190 The organization then released a written statement dated on 11 October 2016, which  
191 was signed by Ma'ruf Amin and MUI's secretary general, Anwar Abbas, stating that  
192 Ahok had blasphemed Islam and urging the security apparatus "to pursue the legal  
193 process against the blasphemer of Islam."<sup>25</sup> This statement was influential because it  
194 was officially issued by MUI, which is the umbrella of biggest Muslim organizations  
195 in Indonesia and a semi-state institution. It was signed by the MUI chairman and its  
196 secretary general, who were respectively influential figures in Indonesia's biggest and  
197 second biggest Muslim organizations, Nadhlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah.

198 Some Islamist figures then followed up this statement by establishing a movement  
199 called the National Movement for Safeguarding MUI Fatwas (GNPF-MUI). The Islamists  
200 figures were, among others, Rizieq Shihab, then Grand Imam of FPI and also a Muslim  
201 traditionalist; Bachtiar Nasir, the Secretary General of the Council of Indonesia  
202 Intellectual and Young Ulema (MIUMI); Zaitun Rasmin, then chairman of Wahdah  
203 Islamiyah Indonesia; and Mohammad Al Khaththath, then secretary general of Forum  
204 Umat Islam (Islam Community Forum/FUI); and supporters of Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia.  
205 These influential Islamist figures then organized a protest on 14 October 2016, which  
206 was the first of several big protests between 2016 and 2017 that demanded the pros-  
207 ecution of Ahok.

208 The protests culminated on 2 December 2016 (which inspired the naming of this  
209 movement, namely Aksi Bela Islam [Defending Islam Action] 212), as the result of  
210 persistent campaigning by the anti-Jokowi camps, especially the Islamists. The framing  
211 of Jokowi as anti-Islam, and also Ahok as the embodiment of Chinese-Indonesians  
212 not only dominating business, but also the country's politics, fuelled social and political  
213 resentment among people who were against the Joko Widodo regime. Saiful Mujani  
214 argues that the anti-Chinese resentment was not big between 2001 and 2016.<sup>26</sup> However,  
215 in 2016, he asserts the resentment rose due to the mobilization of anti-Chinese  
216 Indonesian sentiment. A survey by Marcus Mietzner and Burhanuddin Muhtadi con-  
217 curred that "religio-political entrepreneurs" were the drivers behind the rise of  
218 anti-Chinese Indonesia sentiments following the anti-Ahok campaign in that year.<sup>27</sup>  
219 These entrepreneurs, which included FPI executives, were effective in playing upon  
220 anti-Chinese Indonesian issues, for example, stating that Chinese-Indonesians are not  
221 fit to serve as leaders because many of them are non-Muslims. This effective campaign  
222 contributed to the exponential growth of the anti-Ahok movement in the run up to  
223 the 2017 gubernatorial election.

224 The above section shows political polarization as social processes resulting from  
225 previous political contestations contributing to the rise of the Aksi Bela Islam move-  
226 ment. The leaders of the movement revived old anti-Jokowi campaigns in their oppo-  
227 sition against Ahok, whom they portrayed as a Jokowi sidekick. This tactic strengthened

228 their base, which consisted of Prabowo supporters. By playing the blasphemy card,  
229 they could expand that base as they were able to gain support from Muslims from  
230 different backgrounds, including those who earlier supported President Joko Widodo.  
231

### 232 **Organization and Resources**

233  
234 Doug McAdam suggests that to be successful a movement needs four resources: mem-  
235 bers, interpersonal rewards that provide motives and incentives for members to be  
236 active in the organization, a communication network, and leaders.<sup>28</sup> Participants in  
237 the 212 movement “were recruited along established lines of interaction,”<sup>29</sup> through a  
238 variety of mediums. A team of scholars from the Centre for Strategic and International  
239 Studies (CSIS) found that individuals were recruited to join the protests at religious  
240 events organized in mosques, schools, through WhatsApp groups and other venues on  
241 social media as well as through mainstream media outlets.<sup>30</sup> These mediums were not  
242 only useful in helping them recruit members, but also in coordinating this vast  
243 movement.

244 In regard to the interpersonal rewards, the participants wished for Ahok to be  
245 prosecuted for blasphemy and this sole demand made them more energized in par-  
246 ticipating in the movement, since they wanted the reward, namely the legal prosecution  
247 of Ahok. The CSIS researchers found that the main motivation for people participating  
248 in the protests was to see Ahok punished for blaspheming Islam.<sup>31</sup> The Aksi Bela  
249 Islam movement’s communication network was crucial to spur both participant recruit-  
250 ment and coordination among both the leaders and participants in the protests. After  
251 the manipulated video of Ahok’s speech was posted on Facebook, there were scattered,  
252 individual protests offline and online against Ahok, but it was only after the meetings  
253 at MUI and the establishment of GNPf-MUI that large-scale action was possible  
254 because the establishment of GNPf-MUI ensured the presence of an extensive com-  
255 munication network.

256 The last resource to guarantee the movement’s success was the presence of capable  
257 leaders. Aksi Bela Islam mobilized hundreds of thousands of participants, guided them  
258 to participate in the protests and ensured those protests remained peaceful. All these  
259 results required good management and mobilization skills, for example, in manipulating  
260 and controlling people’s emotions, in raising funding, and in getting as well as in  
261 distributing food and beverages. MUI ulema, such as Ma’ruf Amin, provided spiritual  
262 guidance, while Rizieq Shihab, Bachtiar Nasir, Zaitun Rasmin and Mohammad Al  
263 Khaththath were in charge of mobilization and turnout. In sum, this section shows  
264 that the social movement had excellent resources: a great number of members, good  
265 interpersonal rewards that provide motives for members to be active in the organiza-  
266 tion, a good communication network, and capable leaders. Capable leaders were able  
267 to organize and to mobilize all these resources to create the successful social movement.  
268

### 269 **Framing**

270  
271 Cognitive framing is a key component in social movement development. People are  
272 more likely to engage in political contention, when they feel that they are the victim  
273 of illegitimate actions by the government, and, also feel that they have the capacity

274 to produce social change.<sup>32</sup> Leaders of the movement were effective in framing Ahok's  
 275 statement as blasphemy. They disseminated this narrative on social media and at  
 276 religious events organized in mosques, such as sermons during Friday prayers. These  
 277 narratives, which were extended by their supporters and sympathizers online and  
 278 offline, shaped and influenced public opinion that Ahok was a blasphemer of Islam.  
 279 This is further exemplified by the pamphlets distributed at the protests held in Jakarta  
 280 and other cities in Indonesia between 2016 and 2017. Pamphlets and banners carried  
 281 by protesters demanded: "Arrest and jail Ahok, the blasphemer of Islam and the  
 282 Quran."<sup>33</sup> Many protesters unfurled these kinds of banners at the largest protest held  
 283 on 2 December 2016 in Jakarta.

284 Another narrative that the movement leaders and sympathizers promoted was that  
 285 Chinese-Indonesians already controlled the Indonesian economy, and that Ahok win-  
 286 ning the 2017 gubernatorial election would expand Chinese-Indonesian control in  
 287 politics. Rizieq Shihab warned Muslims *via* Twitter and *via* a public speech that the  
 288 Chinese government would conquer Indonesia through variety of means, including  
 289 "through providing huge loans to Indonesia and through supporting the right  
 290 Indonesians of Chinese descent to be elected as the head of regional government in  
 291 Indonesia, and even to be elected as Indonesian president."<sup>34</sup> This narrative, which  
 292 was advanced in early and mid-December 2016, clearly aimed at persuading Muslims  
 293 not to vote for Ahok, implying that he was the proxy of the Chinese government in  
 294 their effort to conquer Indonesia. Movement sympathizer, Hatta Taliwang, the director  
 295 of the Soekarno Hatta research institute, was even more explicit in his narrative against  
 296 Ahok. Interviewed by online media, he argued that Ahok running for governor shows  
 297 the "Chinese-Indonesian ethnic group's effort to conquer Indonesian politics, following  
 298 their successful endeavour in dominating Indonesia's economy."<sup>35</sup> These narratives were  
 299 well-received by Muslims from variety of Islamic backgrounds.

300 In short, the Aksi Bela Islam movement leaders successfully framed Ahok as a  
 301 blasphemer of Islam. This successful framing resulted in support by various streams  
 302 of Muslims. In doing so, it expanded the Aksi Bela Islam movement's base of support.  
 303 As these frames became the dominant narratives, not only Islamist followers and  
 304 sympathizers but also moderate Muslims came to believe that Ahok had blasphemed  
 305 Islam and he needed to be legally punished. This successful framing provided a strong  
 306 motive for people, especially those who were anti-Jokowi to participate in the series  
 307 of protests to demand the prosecution of Ahok.

### 308 ***The Social Control Response to the Aksi Bela Islam Movement***

311 Due to the massive turn-out in the protests demanding the prosecution of Ahok, many  
 312 social and political organizations warmly embraced the movement, including the  
 313 Prosperous Justice Party (PKS), FPI and HTI. Even moderate Muslim organizations  
 314 such as Nadhlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, who stated that their organiza-  
 315 tions would not join in the event, did not forbid their members from participating in  
 316 movement activities. Not surprisingly, President Joko Widodo was uneasy about the  
 317 protests. His aides advised him not to attend the rally on 2 December 2016 on security  
 318 grounds, but he turned up at the rally anyway, aiming to calm the situation. His  
 319 presence served to undermine the effort by leaders of the rally, namely Islamists who

320 persistently opposed his regime, who used the rallies as proxy to delegitimize and to  
321 erode his political power. At least, by attending the rally, he showed that he cared  
322 about the protesters' cause. This move was strategic to embrace the protesters, who  
323 demanded prosecution of his close-ally, Ahok. The rally proceeded peacefully.

324 In the aftermath of the rally, Jokowi accommodated the social movement's key  
325 demands. He allowed for Ahok to be prosecuted. He also attended a Sharia econ-  
326 omy seminar to address the social movement's concern about Muslims lagging  
327 behind in the Indonesian's economy. Joko Widodo accommodating these demands  
328 was a signal that the president acknowledged the social movement's political power  
329 which through the series of protests had unified Muslims from a variety of Islamic  
330 backgrounds across Indonesia's political landscape. He understood that if he failed  
331 to accommodate them, the leaders of the movement could further undermine his  
332 political power. Jokowi was hoping that by accommodating their demands, he could  
333 cool down social and political tensions. However, he also moved quickly against  
334 the Islamists. He banned FPI and HTI because the regime understood that they  
335 lacked support from Indonesia's mainstream Muslims. In contrast, the Aksi Bela  
336 Islam movement could not be repressed in the same manner as it drew support  
337 from various streams of Muslims, including Muhammadiyah and NU members. He  
338 thus responded cautiously and even accommodated some of their demands. Joko  
339 Widodo's soft response to the movement, in turn, provided leeway for the leaders  
340 to keep the movement going.

### 342 **The Fall of the Aksi Bela Islam Movement**

344 The Aksi Bela Islam movement was successful in that the organizers were able to  
345 mobilize a huge turnout, in particular for the 2 December 2016 rally. Following this  
346 rally, sustaining this movement became the next challenge. To survive and thrive, the  
347 Aksi Bela Islam movement had to "be able to create a more enduring organization  
348 structure to sustain the movement."<sup>36</sup> This saw the establishment of Persaudaraan  
349 Alumni 212 after the December protest. However, efforts to sustain the social move-  
350 ment largely failed to materialize. This raises the question why.

### 352 ***The Unsupportive Structure of Political Opportunities***

354 The polarization between Prabowo and Jokowi supporters was still strong and even  
355 increased between the early years and the end of the first term of Jokowi's presidency.  
356 The social movement benefited from this polarization as they also obtained support  
357 from the supporters of Prabowo as well as Islamist activists and Muslim clerics. The  
358 successful organization of the series of the "212 protests" was also due to political  
359 support by leaders from the Gerindra political party and figures of other political  
360 parties such as the PKS.<sup>37</sup> For example, Fadli Zon and Fachri Hamzah, prominent  
361 figures of Gerindra and PKS respectively, attended the protest. Moreover, participants  
362 who attended the rallies came not only from Java island, but also from cities as far  
363 as Makassar on the island of Sulawesi as well as Aceh and Palembang on the island  
364 of Sumatra,<sup>38</sup> which suggests that this was indeed a national movement.

366 However, their political position became increasingly vulnerable as President Joko  
367 Widodo moved to consolidate his power. Prior to and after the protests, he put his  
368 men, or at least the men of the political parties that supported him, in strategic secu-  
369 rity positions such as the chief of Indonesian police, the Attorney General and the  
370 chief of the Indonesian military.<sup>39</sup> His political power at the House of Representative  
371 (DPR) was solid as the coalition of parties that supported him in his first term con-  
372 trolled over 60% of votes in the DPR.<sup>40</sup> By June 2022, the pro-Joko Widodo coalition  
373 controlled 81.9% of votes in the DPR after the National Mandate Party (PAN) joined  
374 them. This gave Joko Widodo the political power to implement his agenda.

375 Due to his successful power consolidation, his government was confident in fighting  
376 back and taking on the leaders of the 212 movement. Two organizations that played  
377 key roles in the protests, HTI and FPI were banned in 2017 and 2020 respectively.  
378 Leaders of the protest faced criminal prosecutions one by one. Bachtiar Nasir was  
379 named suspect by the police in 2019 with respect to money laundering and for the  
380 violation of, among others, the Criminal Code and the law on foundations. The police  
381 claimed that he had collected Rp 3 billion rupiah through the Yayasan Keadilan Untuk  
382 Semua foundation, which he used to finance the Islamist rallies on 4 November and  
383 2 December 2016 and to provide financial assistance to the victims of natural disasters  
384 in Aceh and West Nusa Tenggara provinces.<sup>41</sup> Bachtiar was one of executives in this  
385 foundation, but he had failed to notify other executives on the disbursement of those  
386 funds. This was considered an act of embezzlement, which violated the article 372 of  
387 the Criminal Code. He was invited for police questioning twice in 2019 and 2020,  
388 but the case has not gone to court yet. Mohammad Al Khaththath faced charges of  
389 treason. He had coordinated an Islamist protest on 31 March 2017 that demanded  
390 that President Joko Widodo dismiss Ahok as Jakarta governor.<sup>42</sup> He was arrested and  
391 detained for three and a half months by police for allegedly directing protest partic-  
392 ipants to occupy the House of Representatives to demand Joko Widodo's resignation.  
393 He was released from police detention in July 2017 following a request from his wife  
394 and an anonymous religious supporter. Rizieq Shihab was named a suspect in several  
395 cases: a pornography-related case, a defamation case, the alleged violation of a quar-  
396 antine law, for spreading fake news, and for lying about the positive results of his  
397 Covid-19 test. He was convicted for the third and fourth cases and was sentenced to  
398 four years in jail.<sup>43</sup> He started his prison term in December 2020, but was released  
399 on parole in July 2022, following a request by his wife and an anonymous Muslim  
400 figure in a position of legal and security authority. At least 35 other FPI figures and  
401 members were charged in court with terrorism offences,<sup>44</sup> including Munarman, the  
402 secretary general of FPI. Munarman was convicted in April 2022 for forging a rela-  
403 tionship with a terrorist group and for inciting others "to commit an act potentially  
404 leading to an act of terrorism."<sup>45</sup> He was sentenced to three years in jail. The sum  
405 total of these cases show that while the Aksi Bela Islam movement was successful in  
406 mobilizing protests, the Widodo government was also successful in repressing them.

407 Nevertheless, it is important to note that the political dynamic was not a winner  
408 takes all process. Joko Widodo's government repressed the movement, but his govern-  
409 ment also accommodated some demands by the movement. For example, the police  
410 charged Ahok, who was the main target of the movement, with blaspheming Islam,  
411 which resulted in him being prosecuted and eventually jailed. The government also

412 responded seriously to the movement's demands for the improvement of the Muslim  
413 economy, acknowledging the concerns about "the unfair system of the economy and  
414 the politics that result in the majority of Muslims remaining poor."<sup>46</sup> Bachtiar Nasir,  
415 the former leader of GNPF-MUI who brought down Ahok, had argued that the gap  
416 of wealth between the Chinese-Indonesian and Muslims is the nation's top problem.  
417 He further argued that the next step was to tackle the economic inequality between  
418 the Chinese-Indonesians and Muslims and to promote economic sovereignty among  
419 Muslims. He "advocated an affirmative action programme for native Indonesians" as  
420 the majority of them are Muslims.<sup>47</sup> The social movement was the reflection of such  
421 grievances.

422 Joko Widodo's government responded positively to these demands. Only few months  
423 after the series of protests between October and December 2016, high-ranking gov-  
424 ernment officials attended and briefed the participants of the Konggres Ekonomi Umat  
425 (Muslim Community Economic Congress), which was organized between 22 and 24  
426 April 2017 by MUI. The congress was titled "Arus Baru Ekonomi Indonesia" [The  
427 New Current of the Indonesian Economy] and aimed at "closing the economic gap  
428 and spurring the nation's economic pace."<sup>48</sup> President Joko Widodo opened the congress  
429 while Vice President Jusuf Kalla closed it. The presence of the number one and the  
430 number two Indonesian government officials showed their strong intent to accommo-  
431 date the demands. President Joko Widodo again opened and attended the second  
432 congress held four years later, and in the congress, he explained his government's  
433 efforts to tackle the economic gap between the haves and the have-nots through pro-  
434 viding cheap loans for small and medium enterprises, many of which are Muslim.<sup>49</sup>  
435 It again shows Joko Widodo's serious intention to address the demands voiced by the  
436 212 movement.

### 437 ***A Disorganized Movement***

440 The Persaudaraan Alumni 212 was no longer effective as leaders of this movement  
441 were either busy fighting against criminal charges by security officials and the courts  
442 or retreated in fear of being the target of further state prosecution. The absence of  
443 Rizieq Shihab, who was the source of inspiration for the social movement, dealt it  
444 severe blow. He was released from prison in July 2022 on parole, after he had served  
445 two thirds of his total prison time (three years). But his parole status continued until  
446 June 2024, which means he was still bound by prison rules. He could be jailed again  
447 if he violated the release conditions. This has affected his social and political stance.  
448 He is no longer critical of the Joko Widodo government. Social and political figures  
449 visited his house after he left prison, but he has never made anti-Jokowi statements.  
450 He has shown no intention to return to politics. His public comments have been  
451 normative, thus suggesting he was turning toward becoming a safe player in politics  
452 due to the fear of legal prosecution. For example, after his release he called for  
453 Indonesians to perform a "revolusi akhlak" (character revolution) to improve the  
454 country's "damaged" social, economic, and political situation. In contrast to his com-  
455 ments in the past, he did not blame the Joko Widodo government for this "damaged  
456 situation."<sup>50</sup> He explained, without elaborating, that "the damaged situation" referred  
457 to "the high level of falsehoods in the country", the high level of debt (public or

458 government debt), rampant corruption and economic crisis. To sum up, the organi-  
459 zation of the movement was in disarray after its leaders faced legal charges and good  
460 number of them were prosecuted. The matter became worse after the figure that  
461 inspired the movement, Rizieq Shihab, retreated from politics due to the fear of recur-  
462 ring legal prosecution by the Joko Widodo regime.

### 463 *Less Persuasive Framing*

464  
465  
466  
467 The movement's Islamist leaders were aware that many participants, who were members  
468 of Muhammadiyah or NU and other Islamic mass organizations, only wished to see  
469 Ahok jailed for blaspheming Islam. The framing that Ahok is the blasphemer of Islam  
470 was so powerful that even Muslims from moderate backgrounds were willing to take  
471 to the street to demand Ahok's resignation. These people were not interested in the  
472 other agenda items, such as undermining the political power of Joko Widodo regime  
473 or the fair division of the country's economic pie. However, after Ahok failed to be  
474 re-elected in 2017 and was subsequently jailed for blasphemy, the framing that Ahok  
475 blasphemed Islam was no longer relevant. The Aksi Bela Islam leaders then formulated  
476 and attempted to disseminate a new frame—Muslims economically lagging behind  
477 Chinese—and the need to address this gap. The 212 movement then established a  
478 cooperative, Koperasi Syariah 212, that also partly bears the name of the social move-  
479 ment.<sup>51</sup> The cooperative has run Sharia-based retailing businesses, such as a minimarket  
480 chain under the label 212 Mart and Kita Mart. Between 2017 and 2019, the cooperative  
481 ran 235 shops under the 212 Mart brand across Indonesia, although the number  
482 decreased to 192 shops in the same year due to stiff competition from more established  
483 retailing chains controlled by Chinese-Indonesians, Indomart and Alfamart. The  
484 Islamists also organized a Muslim Community Economic Congress in April 2017.  
485 However, this frame was less resonant and the performance of 212 Mart was less  
486 satisfying.

487 Besides reinventing their framing, Persaudaraan Alumni 212 also ran marquee  
488 activities to sustain the movement: the organization of an annual commemoration of  
489 the 212 protests in 2016. The annual tribute aimed to keep the 212 spirit alive: to be  
490 vigilant against the blasphemers of Islam and to sustain the Muslim brotherhood. But  
491 this failed to sustain the support for this movement. The dwindling number of tribute  
492 participants between 2017 and 2022 shows the decreasing public support. While the  
493 reunion events in 2017 and 2018 still attracted hundreds of thousands of people, by  
494 2019, the police claimed only 10,000 turned up at the event. The commemoration was  
495 held every year, except in the years of 2020 and 2021, due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

496 The Persaudaraan 212 Alumni tried to maintain and to expand political cooperation  
497 to sustain the movement following the 212 protests, but they were unsuccessful. Notably,  
498 they lost support of key political allies. Previously, Prabowo Subianto and the Gerindra  
499 Party supported this social movement. Jaringan Merah Putih (Red & White Network),  
500 a community organization closely affiliated with Gerindra, played an important role  
501 in the organization of the movement's biggest protest on 2 December 2016. This  
502 community organization was one of the main providers of food and beverages dis-  
503 tributed to the rally participants.<sup>52</sup> Prabowo, who was running for the 2019 presidential

504 election, attended the 2018 reunion at the invitation of the organization and gave a  
505 speech before the audience during the rally at Monas Square in Central Jakarta.  
506 However, after his defeat in the 2019 election, he accepted Joko Widodo's proposal to  
507 serve as Minister of Defense. This decision alienated his former allies in the Persaudaraan  
508 212 movement, and since then, he has distanced himself from the Islamist alliance,  
509 which impeded their ability to fundraise to the same degree as they had when he had  
510 been part of their alliance.

511 Leaders of the Persaudaraan Alumni 212 also courted the modernist National  
512 Mandate Party (PAN) to gain political support and to gain access to formal political  
513 processes and institutions. At PAN headquarters on 20 February 2019, a few months  
514 before the 2019 legislative election, they officially declared their support for PAN.  
515 However, PAN performed poorly in the election. This was evidence that the influence  
516 of Persaudaraan Alumni 212 was dwindling among Muslim voters, as they failed to  
517 help PAN secure more votes in the election. To sum up, this section shows that the  
518 framing which the Aksi Bela Islam movement promoted after the successful protest  
519 in 2016 was no longer relevant, and hence they were losing support from the people,  
520 especially many Muslims from different backgrounds.

### 521 ***Greater Social and Political Pressure on Aksi Bela Islam Social Movement***

522  
523 As explained previously, legal repression by the Widodo regime curbed the Aksi Bela  
524 Islam's mobilization capacity. The repression not only targeted the formal leaders of  
525 the social movement, but also conservative Muslim clerics and others who supported  
526 the social movement. These people were prolific speakers and online players; losing  
527 them was great political blow to the Aksi Bela Islam movement. Haikal Hassan's story  
528 is a case in point. Haikal Hassan was a Muslim cleric, internet activist and a promi-  
529 nent supporter of the 212 movement. He was reported to the police for allegedly  
530 spreading lies and defaming Islam during a speech that he delivered at the funeral of  
531 six FPI members shot dead by the police in 2020. In his speech, he recalled that he  
532 had a dream where he met the Prophet Muhammad, following the death of two of  
533 his children. In the dream, the Prophet told him that he is not supposed to be afraid  
534 because his children are with him.<sup>53</sup> Haikal used the same analogy with respect to the  
535 six members of FPI, that the deceased will be taken care of by the Prophet Muhammad.  
536 FPI supporters must not fear for their well-being in the afterlife. A person of Arab  
537 descent, Husin Shahab, reported him to the police. The police invited Hassan for  
538 questioning in December 2020, and then invited him again in November 2021 for  
539 another round of questioning. Facing this kind of social and political intimidation,  
540 Hassan was no longer critical of the Joko Widodo regime, and on 23 February 2022,  
541 he submitted his resignation from the executive board of the Persaudaraan Alumni 212.

542  
543 The role of Hassan and other influential supporters of the movement was important  
544 because they maintained the spirit of the social movement through offline speeches  
545 and online posts. They enjoyed unparalleled access due to their religious legitimacy.  
546 However, social pressure from both supporters of President Joko Widodo and the  
547 Widodo administration reduced their effectiveness in shaping public opinion which,  
548 in turn, decreased the power and influence of the movement. The Aksi Bela Islam  
549 movement was facing hard social and political pressures from the Joko Widodo regime

550 after their successful series of protests which not only targeted core leaders of the  
551 movement, but also their key supporters and sympathizers. In this environment, the  
552 social movement struggled to revive the success of their movement.

## 553 554 **Conclusion**

555 This article has argued that ideology is not the only factor that makes a social movement  
556 successful. It has shown that ideology can contribute to a successful movement only  
557 when it is exploited by capable movement leaders, supported by favourable structures  
558 of political opportunities, effective organization, effective framing, and greater social  
559 control. Employing the case of Aksi Bela Islam in Indonesia, this article has taken a  
560 process tracing approach, detailing the rise and fall of the movement. Through the case  
561 study, this article has explained how Islamist leaders of the social movement were savvy  
562 in framing Ahok as the blasphemer of Islam. They used verses from the Quran to show  
563 that Ahok has blasphemed Islam, and they were successful in their endeavour so that  
564 the movement obtained support not only from Islamists, but also from moderate Muslims.  
565 When the main objective of the movement was achieved, namely Ahok's failure to win  
566 the 2017 gubernatorial election followed by the incarceration of Ahok, many participants  
567 left the movement. People abandoning the movement weakened it. Leaders of the orga-  
568 nization realized that the role of ideology, namely the blasphemy accusation against  
569 Ahok, was no longer effective as a framing tool, and they had to find something else  
570 to rejuvenate the movement. This included promoting economic equality to sustain the  
571 movement, for example, by organizing a seminar to raise people's awareness on how to  
572 increase economic welfare among Muslims; or by establishing a cooperative that runs  
573 mini-mart businesses to improve Muslim welfare. These efforts, however, have not been  
574 as successful as the exploitation of the blasphemy issue.

575 The scholarly literature contends that ideology is the dominant factor in making a  
576 successful social movement. Writing on the rise of Hizbut Tahrir in Kyrgyzstan,  
577 Emmanuel Karagiannis argued that the role of ideology is important in boosting the  
578 strength of social movements as ideology "can motivate individual participation and  
579 give coherence to collective action...Ideology often performs multiple functions, includ-  
580 ing transforming vague dissatisfactions into a politicised agenda and providing a sense  
581 of collective identity."<sup>54</sup> He shows that in Kyrgyzstan the rise of Hizbut Tahrir was due  
582 to the extensive use of "religious theory and passages from the Quran to mobilise  
583 support ....it is through the diffusion of Hizb ut-Tahrir's ideology that grievances  
584 become politicised, that people develop a collective identity rooted in religion, and  
585 that people reinterpret their social environment as consisting of potential movement  
586 resources."<sup>55</sup>

587 This argument is powerful. However, the Aksi Bela Islam movement shows that,  
588 for a social movement to be successful, ideology is not sufficient on its own. This  
589 case study shows that ideology, which is defined as "a set of ideas, beliefs and attitudes,  
590 consciously or unconsciously held, which reflects or shapes understandings or mis-  
591 conceptions of the social and political world"<sup>56</sup> would not have been able to ensure  
592 the success of a social movement, had it not been exploited by capable leaders. In  
593 short, the role of movement leaders in promoting and instilling the blasphemy ideology  
594 was crucial to motivate people to take to the streets to demand the legal prosecution  
595

596 of Ahok. Also, absent in Karagiannis' argument, among others, is the discussion on  
597 the presence of a favourable structure of opportunities that provided the fertile ground  
598 for the rise of the Hizbut Tahrir movement in Kyrgyzstan.

599 The Aksi Bela Islam movement is interesting because it is the largest protest in  
600 Indonesian history. Factors that contribute to its rise and its fall could be different  
601 from similar Islamist movements in other countries. One factor that strengthens a  
602 movement in one country could contribute to the fall of the movement in other  
603 countries. For example, while the above case study shows that state repression curbed  
604 the power of the Aksi Bela Islam social movement, in another scholarly work that  
605 focuses on the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt between 1932 and 1954 shows  
606 that the social movement rose during the increased state repression in that era.<sup>57</sup> This  
607 example of the Aksi Bela Islam movement provides a richer understanding in the  
608 social movement literature as it shows a case study that supports the non-consensual  
609 nature of political process theory; yet it is useful because it is agile and adaptable to  
610 different political environments across the world.

611 In conclusion, by using Doug McAdam's framework, this article charted the rise  
612 and fall of the movement, examining the structure of political opportunities, mobilizing  
613 structures, framing, and social control responses to a social movement. This article  
614 also presented Aksi Bela Islam as a case study, which augments the growing number  
615 of scholarly works that discuss social movements in non-Western or non-liberal coun-  
616 tries. This addition enriches scholars' understanding on this topic.

## 617 Notes

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621 attended by some 300,000 people who come from Jakarta and outskirts cities of Jakarta.  
622 The rally aimed to inform people that Indonesia had proclaimed independence on 17  
623 August 1945 and more importantly, the rally was to show that elite and activists were  
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- 712 Nasdem). His successor, who started to serve in 2019, is a former prosecutor, who happens
- 713 to be the younger brother of a prominent PDIP politician. PDIP is the main supporter of
- 714 Joko Widodo and Widodo is a cadre of PDIP. Gen. Tito Karnavian, Gen. Idham Azis and
- 715 Gen. Ari Dono Sukmanto, who served between 2016 and 2021, were all appointed by him.
- 716 Gen. Listyo Sigit Prabowo, who started to serve as the chief of the Indonesian police in
- 717 January 2021, is Joko Widodo's man. Sigit served as chief of Solo police when Joko Widodo
- 718 served as the mayor of Solo, Central Java province. Similarly, Commodore Hadi Tjahjanto,
- 719 who served as the chief of the Indonesian military between 2017 and 2021, was also con-
- 720 sidered to be his man, as he already knew the Air Force general when the latter served as
- 721 local airbase near Solo. Hadi Tjahjanto and Listyo Sigit Prabowo are known as part of
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## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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