

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Getting our piece of the “national cake”: the Islamists’ attitude toward Yudhoyono’s and Jokowi’s China policies

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Abstract

Studies on Indonesia–China relations have emphasized the central role of Indonesia’s domestic politics in shaping its foreign policy toward China. However, there has been little discussion on the context in which and the extent to which internal struggles for power have contributed to shape Indonesia’s China policy. Contributing to such a discussion, this article specifically focuses on the roles of Indonesian Islamist groups in affecting Jakarta–Beijing ties. It examines their political maneuvers in responses to the attitudes and policies of two governments, the Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (2004–2014) administration and that of Joko “Jokowi” Widodo (2014–), on China-related foreign policy issues. Both Yudhoyono’s and Jokowi’s governments display the same friendly attitude toward China. On the South China Sea issues, nevertheless, Jokowi’s government adopts tougher measures against China’s maneuvers. Despite Jokowi’s implementation of such policy, the Islamists put up considerable resistance to his China policy, even compared to his predecessor. This article finds that the extent of power sharing between the Islamists and the regime in power determines the former’s responses toward the latter’s China policy. This suggests that in the management of bilateral relations, the Islamists are not a hindrance *per se* in Indonesia–China relations.

Keywords: China; Communist; ethnic Chinese; Indonesia–China relations; Indonesian foreign policy; Islamist; political Islam; power-sharing

Introduction

Following the fall of Suharto’s authoritarian regime and especially in the democratic consolidation era, Indonesia has seen some unprecedented developments in its relations with China. During his decade-long presidency (2004–2014), Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono laid a stronger foundation for bilateral relations by signing two landmark agreements: the Strategic Partnership in 2005 and its upgrade the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2013.¹ In addition, Jakarta’s burgeoning economic ties with China were also strongly evident. One year before Yudhoyono left office, Indonesia saw China replace Japan as the country’s largest trading partner. In 2014, Indonesia’s total trade with China reached USD 48.2 billion, a more than fivefold increase within the ten years he held in office.

Joko “Jokowi” Widodo, Yudhoyono’s successor, continues this development. In the diplomatic domain, Jokowi markedly intensifies Jakarta’s bilateral exchanges with Beijing. Compared to his predecessors, Jokowi has met with his Chinese counterpart much more frequently. During his presidency (2014–), Indonesia–China stronger relations are particularly evident in the field of economics. In 2016, China was among the top three countries with the largest foreign direct investment (FDI) in

¹See Tjhin 2012.



Indonesia.² Three years later, it replaced Japan as the country's second-largest source of FDI with a realized investment valued at USD 4.7 billion.³

However, both government's displays of the same friendly attitude toward China by embracing closer economic and diplomatic cooperation have triggered markedly different internal dynamics. Like what happened to Yudhoyono, Jokowi has to face domestic criticism for expanding his country's economic exchanges or pursuing friendly relations with China. Still, he needs to deal with notably much more severe criticism as a strong anti-China/Chinese sentiment surfaced.⁴ Some domestic actors exploit negative sentiments to mobilize considerable opposition against Jokowi's government who have been perceived as excessively pro-China. Regarding these differences between the responses of some domestic actors toward Yudhoyono's and Jokowi's China policy, prominent scholar on Indonesian foreign policy Dewi Fortuna Anwar has noted that "throughout the Yudhoyono period, Indonesia's economic relations with China had not been a divisive political issue. Nor was Yudhoyono ... seen as being too pro-China."⁵

This article explores the internal dynamics that emerge along with Indonesia's expanding relations with China. It follows the path taken by previous authoritative and important studies on Indonesia–China relations that underline the prominent role of internal politics in shaping the former's external relations with the latter.⁶ A recent line of scholarly works has further confirmed that an internal struggle for power has continued to play such a role even in the context of Indonesia's asymmetrical relations with a rising China that presented both opportunities and challenges to the country.

Yuliantoro, for example, links internal balance of power with prospects for Indonesia–China cooperation.⁷ He argues that President Jokowi's re-election in 2019, with a wider support from both the people and the political elites, will contribute positively to Jakarta's intention to pursue closer economic ties with Beijing. Indeed, Indonesia's China policy during his first presidential term had been largely constrained. This is, as Yeremia highlights, partly due to "his regime need[ing] to strike a balance between competing pathways" of developmentalism, nationalism, and Islamism to further ensure political survival.⁸ Indonesia's internal struggle for power has prevented the country from "taking full advantage of the opportunities presented by China's rise."⁹

Amidst the emphasis on the central role of Indonesia's internal political dynamics, nevertheless, only a few studies elaborate on the extent to which those dynamics have contributed to shape Indonesia's China policy.¹⁰ In this regard, this article seeks to contribute to current literature by looking into some important episodes of Indonesia–China relations to examine how responses of some major political actors have influenced overall relations, with specific focus on Islamist groups.

This focus on the roles of Islamic political forces is important for two reasons. First, post-authoritarian Indonesia has seen the emergence of political Islam as a major political force following the decades-long suppression during the rule of Suharto as well as his predecessors, Sukarno.¹¹ Second, Islamist groups in Indonesia have historically been among the domestic political actors who harbor a strong animosity against China as well as the ethnic Chinese.¹²

This article finds that Islamists are not always triggered to mobilize anti-China/Chinese sentiment by the widely perceived danger of China's economic domination or threat of the country undermining

²Indonesia Investment Coordinating Board 2017. China was ranked only eighth when Jokowi assumed power in 2014 and was not even in the top-ten list before that.

³Indonesia Investment Coordinating Board 2020.

⁴Bourchier 2019; Fossati, Hui and Negara 2017; Lim 2017; Setijadi 2017.

⁵Anwar 2019, p. 155.

⁶Anwar 2019, Mozingo 2007, Sukma 1999, Sukma 2002a, Suryadinata 1977.

⁷Yuliantoro 2020.

⁸Yeremia 2021, p. 325.

⁹Fitriani 2021, p. 200.

¹⁰See Raditio and Yeremia 2022.

¹¹Baswedan 2004; Fealy and White 2008; Mietzner 2008; Sukma 2002b; Tanuwidjaja 2010; van Bruinessen 2013.

¹²Chin and Tanasaldy 2019; Hadiz and Robison 2012; Mozingo 2007; Sukma 1999. See also Sumaktoyo 2021 as well as Yu and Han 2023.

Indonesia's territorial integrity in the Natuna waters. In this regard, the Islamists' position *vis-à-vis* the ruling coalition is central in defining their responses. If the Islamists are included within or accommodated by the coalition, they refrained from exploiting the anti-China sentiment. On the other hand, if they are excluded from the ruling coalition or prevented from accessing government resources and patronage, the Islamist groups examined in this current article play the Muslim card to generate negative sentiment against China and the ethnic Chinese. This article shows how the Islamist groups (previously accommodated within Yudhoyono's ruling coalition but excluded from the Jokowi's) stirred up anti-China/Chinese sentiment in order to put up direct opposition against Jokowi.

These findings suggest that political Islam is not a hindrance factor in Indonesia–China relations *per se*. Only in an opposition role can the Islamists exploit negative sentiments against China to pursue their interests in the internal struggle for power. Anti-China/Chinese sentiments are leveraged contextually, rather than constantly.¹³ In other words, the domestic politics of Indonesia's more consolidated democracy still provide ample room for both Jakarta and Beijing to further expand their relations. Thus, it is indeed good news for Beijing as it continues to pursue stronger relations with the world's most populous Muslim majority country.

This article is divided into five parts. Following the introductory section, the second section identifies the Islamic political groups in Indonesia and discusses how their animosity against ethnic Chinese, the Communists, and China (CCC) has historically developed. The third section elaborates on Yudhoyono's and Jokowi's approaches to dealing with Islamists. The fourth section then shows how both approaches have triggered different responses from the Islamists toward Indonesia–China relations. It compares the Islamist's responses to the issue of the influx of made-in-China products during Yudhyono period with their responses to the issue of inflow of Chinese foreign workers during the Jokowi period. In addition, it looks into their responses to Yudhoyono's and Jokowi' strategies to deal with Chinese challenges to Indonesia's maritime rights in the Natuna waters. Following the examination of these case studies in both economic and strategic fields, the concluding sections give a summary of the findings and an elaboration of the implications for future efforts in understanding Indonesia–China relations.

Political Islam in Indonesian context

In general, political Islam is a movement to promote Islam's significance, giving the religion a significant role in the governing politics and society of the contemporary Muslim World.¹⁴ Even though political Islam is present globally, its qualities and attributes differ in each country. The nation state is the fundamental structure that rendered political Islam possible.¹⁵ Political Islam in each state depends on the natures of the Islamic parties, their governance, and their political tactics since these factors develop under the specific circumstances of the country.¹⁶

Luthfi Assyaukanie – a prominent Indonesian Muslim scholar – as quoted by Cesari, identified three main polity models in the country: the Islamic Democratic State (IDS), the Religious Democratic State (RDS), and the Liberal Democratic State (LDS).¹⁷ The proponents of IDS as coined by Mohammad Natsir believe that the state, though not a theocracy, must be based on Islam. The groups that adopted this idea in the post-independence period were *Partai Masyumi* (the Consultative Council of Indonesian Muslims Party) and, following the fall of Suharto's authoritarian regime in 1998, PKS (*Partai Keadilan Sejahtera*, Justice and Prosperous Party).¹⁸ Other extra parliamentary groups of this polity model are FPI (*Front Pembela Islam*, the Defender of Islam Front) and HTI (*Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia*).

¹³See Yuliantoro 2020.

¹⁴Fuller 2003.

¹⁵Cesari 2018.

¹⁶Fuller 2003.

¹⁷Cesari 2018.

¹⁸PKS was initially known as PK (*Partai Keadilan*, Justice Party).

The RDS or Muslim Nationalists are represented by moderate Islamic organizations such as NU and Muhammadiyah as well as PPP (*Partai Persatuan Pembangunan*, United Development Party), PKB (*Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa*, National Awakening Party), and PAN (*Partai Amanat Nasional*, National Mandate Party).¹⁹ The groups of this polity model suggest that democracy cannot be built on Islamic ideology, since it will marginalize the participation of other religious communities. RDS promoters advocate the state establishment of religion – including non-Islam religions and dismiss the concept of an Islamic state.

The LDS groups or the nationalist–secularists advocate the separation between state and religion and oppose the officialization of religion. In Indonesia, this polity model is represented by the nationalist such as PDIP (Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle) under the leadership of Megawati Sukarnoputri – the daughter of Sukarno who was the country’s first president.

The political Islam actors, the Islamists in this study, refer to the proponents of the IDS. There are several distinguishing characteristics that signify the Islamists in Indonesian context, particularly in the post-1998 era. First, the Islamists in this study groups have an Islamist agenda, i.e., promoting sharia in the politics and society, and even in the long run they seek to implement Islamization of Indonesia. This character is apparent for FPI and HTI, but not PKS. PKS states in its statute (article 7) that its mission is to “build a civic society that is just, prosperous and dignified in the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia based on Pancasila ideology.” However, in the Party’s internal doctrinal documents, the Party makes clear that it aims at comprehensive Islamization of Indonesia and the implementation of sharia in the long term.²⁰ Being an ideological offspring of Egyptian Moslem Brotherhood (*Ikhwanul Muslimin*), PKS adopts the strategy of disguising the main agenda and branding itself as the promoter of social welfare, anti-corruption, and good governance.²¹

In addition to that, previous studies also categorize PKS, FPI, and HTI into the Islamist camp in fundamentalist sense. Mietzner and Mutadi call FPI and HTI scripturalist, and PKS puritan.²² Cesari regards FPI and HTI fundamentalist.²³ Nuraniyah labels PKS and HTI hardliner and intolerant groups; particularly, the puritan PKS aims at implementation of Islamic law upon Indonesia’s diverse society.²⁴ Hadiz and Robison classify PKS a puritan Islamic Party and FPI – HTI Islamic rule imposers.²⁵ All in all, these scholars distinguish PKS, FPI, and HTI from Muslim-inclusive/Muslim Nationalists such as NU (*Nahdlatul Ulama*, the Revival of Ulama), Muhammadiyah, and their mass-based political parties (PKB, PPP, and PAN).

The second distinguishing characteristic is their opposition toward the nationalist–secularist. This characteristic is obvious from the Islamist groups such as PKS, FPI, and HTI which never cooperate or share power with the nationalist–secularist group, i.e., PDIP, on a national level since 1998 due to their opposing ideologies.²⁶ Particularly, PDIP and PKS are both political parties with strong ideological nuances. Instead of operating mainly based on electoral gain, these parties steadfastly hold their respective ideology in taking their political stance.

Ideologically, the proponents of the IDS or the Islamist hold the opposite views with the supporters of the LDS or the nationalist–secularists for at least three reasons.²⁷ Firstly, the Islamists aim at social morality. Building a moral society according to the Islamic precept is one of the main Islamist agenda while the nationalist–secularists leave the moral issues to personal discretion. Secondly, the Islamists claim to promote transcendental values that go beyond worldly affairs. They regard the nationalist–

¹⁹PPP and PKB rely on NU constituents and PAN relies on Muhammadiyah constituents. PPP and PKB do not establish institutional connection with NU, but they are culturally linked, the same thing with PAN and Muhammadiyah.

²⁰Bubalo, Fealy and Mason 2008.

²¹Liow 2015.

²²Mietzner and Muhtadi 2020.

²³Cesari 2018.

²⁴Nuraniyah 2020.

²⁵Hadiz and Robison 2012.

²⁶Kompas.com 2022.

²⁷Fuller 2003.

secularists are inherently alien to this goal. Thirdly, the Islamists perceive that nationalism could be a dangerous force within the *umma* (Muslim community) since it has potentially divided it. Nationalism may enforce the segment of *umma* against non-Muslim domination, but in the long run it may harm the *umma* itself.

Historically, in Indonesian context, the Islamists do not develop its uneasiness toward nationalist-secularists only. Indonesian Islamists share the anguish of global Islamists who lament the backwardness of *umma vis-à-vis* non-Muslim superiority. The Islamists today are particularly concerned with non-Muslim domination in many fields.²⁸ They attribute the decline of Muslim societies to moral and spiritual weakening. Hence, Indonesian Islamists advocate the implementation of sharia to protect Muslims from non-Muslim's conspiracy, resolve the crisis in the society – as the consequence of ungodly system – and bring prosperity to *umma*.²⁹

Islamists' animosity toward ethnic Chinese, the Communists, and China

This section elaborates on the historical development of animosity between Islamists and ethnic Chinese, as well as the Communists, and by extension, China. There are at least three dimensions to this phenomenon: economic competition, political rivalries, and bloody conflicts. This structure arguably perpetuates the Islamists' perception of those three entities as a "triangular threat," causing the enmity to linger.³⁰

Political Islam in Indonesia emerged in the context of the growing proto-nationalist movement of the early twentieth century. It could be traced back to the establishment of the first mass-based political movement under the Dutch colonial rule, the Sarekat Islam (SI), in 1912. Around that time, Islam first and foremost signified the sense of being people of the land, as Christianity was the signifier of the Dutch and Confucianism of the ethnic Chinese who resided in the Dutch East Indies.³¹ SI was founded as an instrument to protect the interests of the batik traders in Solo, Central Java against a stronger competition of the members of the out-group, the Chinese traders.³²

This episode highlights how political Islam in Indonesia has historically been incubated within economic concerns of some members of the Muslim middle class.³³ In post-Independence Indonesia, political Islam continued to exploit this petty bourgeoisie's grievances and the ethnic Chinese again became the target. A call for an economic policy "which directly favored ethnic Indonesians in their competition with all others, Chinese of Indonesian citizenship included" was echoed in Masyumi's stronghold in early 1956.³⁴ What was later known as the Asaat Movement soon spilled over to other policy domains, creating a gateway for the anti-Chinese sentiment to again resurface in the public. As Herbert Feith noted, a high sense of political dissatisfaction was indeed widely shared among the general public and the members of Masyumi, the party which failed to win the majority of votes.³⁵ In these regards, the Asaat Movement can show how the rise of anti-Chinese sentiment is rooted in the general public's dissatisfaction with the country's socio-economic and political situation and how political Islam played a central role in exploiting the sentiment.

During the initial two decades of Suharto's authoritarian rule in Indonesia, political Islam faced a process of marginalization, as the government sought to suppress its influence. However, a shift occurred in the late 1980s when President Suharto strategically embraced Islamic rhetoric, recognizing the potential to consolidate his power base by appealing to the growing and increasingly educated

²⁸ *ibid.*

²⁹ Hasan 2005.

³⁰ The term "triangular threat" was introduced by Rizal Sukma. See Sukma 1999 and Sukma 2009. He argued that ethnic Chinese, the Communists, and China are interwoven constituting a threat perception, which prevented Jakarta from resuming its diplomatic ties with Beijing for 23 years (1967–1990).

³¹ Shiraishi 1990, p. 43.

³² Kahin 2013; Madinier 2015.

³³ Hadiz and Robison 2012.

³⁴ Feith 2007, p. 481.

³⁵ Feith 2007.

Muslim community.³⁶ To a large extent, the situation mirrored what happened during the Asaat Movement. Political expression of Islam was primarily found among the middle class and business circles who “hoped to displace ethnic Chinese and foreign capital in the upper reaches of the economy.”³⁷

The perception that ethnic Chinese are more successful economically compared to other ethnic groups in Indonesia is pervasive until today. According to a survey by ISEAS in 2017, most of the respondents perceive that life is easier for Chinese Indonesian: 48% compared to 31.6% who said neither and 20.4% who disagree with the statement.³⁸ The majority of respondents (59.8%) also believe that the ethnic Chinese are more likely than other Indonesians to be wealthy.

Some high-profile Muslims project this perception and express their grudge publicly. Then Vice President Jusuf Kalla³⁹ in a 2017 event held by MUI (*Majelis Ulama Indonesia*, Indonesian Ulema Council) contrasted rich Chinese descents with poor “Muslim pribumi.”⁴⁰ Kalla mentioned that there is only one “Muslim businessmen” for every ten ethnic Chinese businessmen.⁴¹ In 2023, before the Eid Gathering of ICMI (The Indonesian Association of Muslim Intellectuals), Kalla stated that the Indonesian economy is dominated by the ethnic Chinese. “They only comprise 4.5% of the population, but control more than 50% of the country’s economy,” Kalla said.⁴² It is noteworthy that the statements were always delivered before Islamic audience with the intention to contrast, if not highlight, the uneasiness of Muslims toward ethnic Chinese.

In addition to that, political Islam in Indonesia has historically been intensified in the context of struggle for leadership position among the Muslim masses. SI’s central leadership under Oemar Said Tjokroaminoto, for example, had eventually turned to Islam in addressing the challenges from the Communist sympathizers within this mass organization.⁴³ Tjokroaminoto propagated how communism was atheistic and anti-Islam in nature, and thus, incompatible with SI.⁴⁴ He further transformed the organization into *Partai Sarikat Islam*, a cadre party, seeking to defend those who “entrusts everything to Allah” against those who “endangered the unity of Islam.”⁴⁵

Another outright confrontation between the Islamists and the Communists arose amid Indonesia’s first general election in 1955. Anti-communist narratives were at the core of Masyumi’s strategy to mobilize electoral support.⁴⁶ The party, which is the main embodiment of political Islam in post-independence Indonesia, propagated, for example, that Muslims should not vote for Partai Komunis Indonesia (PKI) because “a compromise between religion and Communism was impossible.”⁴⁷ Its religious council (*majelis syuro*) even declared that “a Muslim who embraces Communism or [joins] communist organizations ... is a heretic.”⁴⁸ These anti-Communist narratives were widely distributed to the masses with the help of the party’s media outlets and youth-wing, women group, labor, and peasant union, as well as artist association.⁴⁹

³⁶Sukma 2002b, p. 63.

³⁷Hadiz and Robison 2012, p. 148.

³⁸Fossati, Hui and Negara 2017.

³⁹Apart from his Vice-Presidency, Kalla chaired DMI (*Dewan Masjid Indonesia*, the Council of Indonesian Mosques). Kalla is a businessman cum politician and a prominent Muslim figure. He was paired with Jokowi in the 2014 election to attract Muslim voters and compensate Jokowi’s lack of Islamic credential.

⁴⁰Setijadi 2017, p. 4.

⁴¹Setuningsih 2017.

⁴²CNBC Indonesia 2023.

⁴³These individuals, who were among the first Indonesia Marxists, criticized Tjokroaminoto’s leadership for its cooperative and submissive attitude toward the colonial government. Having expressed more radical demands for social and economic justice, these Leftists managed to attract considerable support, thereby strengthening their influence within SI. See McVey 1965, pp. 22–23.

⁴⁴Shiraishi 1990, p. 237.

⁴⁵ibid., p. 238.

⁴⁶DwicaHYo 2022.

⁴⁷Madinier 2015.

⁴⁸Historia 2013, p. 44.

⁴⁹ibid.

Clashes between Islamists and Communists had also been characterized by bloody violence. This was particularly evident in the aftermath of the 1948 Madiun Affair (*Peristiwa Madiun*). In the eyes of the ruling elites, the Madiun Affair was an attempted coup staged by communist elements centered around PKI.⁵⁰ In the times leading up to the Madiun Affair, the Communists were intensely promoting a land reform program to mobilize support from the masses.⁵¹ This was understood as a direct challenge to Masyumi, as the majority of the big landlords in the territory were party members. According to George McTurnan Kahin, when the communists fled from Madiun, they brutally attacked prominent Islamic figures and religious leaders as well as the Masyumi members.⁵² In this context, Rémy Madinier argued that the Madiun Affair was “a traumatic episode in the Republic [of Indonesia]’s history” that further reinforced the enmity between the Islamists and the communists.⁵³

This bitter and violent memory of Madiun Affair was instrumental in the anticommunist massacre in 1965–1966, which according to Roosa is “one of the worst bloodbaths of the twentieth century.”⁵⁴ Following the abortive coup of September 30, 1965, allegedly staged by PKI, the Indonesian army utilized the memory of Madiun Affair to propagate how the Communists were by nature, treacherous, barbaric, evil, and anti-Islam.⁵⁵ This propagandistic portrayal of PKI helped to organize and then mobilize anti-communist civilian militia, including the Islamists, to arrest and even kill the party members and supporters. Against this background, some of Masyumi supporters reportedly sought to capitalize on the momentum of the anti-PKI campaign, utilizing it as a means to stage a political comeback following their banishment during Sukarno’s Guided Democracy.⁵⁶

The collective memory of the Communist’s brutality lingers until today. The fear of PKI’s revival is quite pervasive in Indonesian society. According to a survey by Media Survei Nasional (Median) in 2021, 46.4% of the Indonesian population think that the issue of PKI’s revival is real.⁵⁷ The top two reasons from those who believe in PKI’s revival are the suspicion on the growing number of Chinese workers (12.3%) and the frequent arrest of Muslim clerics by the authorities (12%). The lingering perception of Communist threat among the society enables the Islamists or any interest group to politicize the issue for advancing their agenda.

The Islamists’ hostility toward the Communists was also evident in their approach to the People’s Republic of China. When Indonesia established diplomatic relations with China in the spring of 1950, Jakarta appointed a chargé d’affaires at a junior level, while China sent an ambassador. This deliberate reluctance to reciprocate by Hatta Cabinet reportedly aimed to keep Indonesia’s relations with China at a lower level, primarily to secure the parliamentary support of the anti-communist Masyumi.⁵⁸ Prime Minister Mohammad Hatta’s two immediate successors, Mohammad Natsir and Sukiman, both from Masyumi, continued Indonesia’s limited engagement with China, projecting clearly what their party was known for: “the strongest anticommunist force in the country, except for the army.”⁵⁹

Prime Minister Sukiman even further antagonized China, causing Jakarta’s one-year-old diplomatic relations with Beijing to reach their lowest point.⁶⁰ In July 1951, diplomatic tension grew when Jakarta denied entry to sixteen Chinese diplomatic staff members. The Sukiman Cabinet became alarmed by the Chinese embassy’s increasing connections with ethnic Chinese communities in Indonesia, following the establishment of China’s consular offices. The situation intensified after the Chinese embassy granted asylum to Alimin, a prominent leader of the PKI, who sought refuge

⁵⁰McGregor 2009.

⁵¹Hadiz and Robison 2012, p. 143.

⁵²Kahin 2013, p. 433.

⁵³Madinier 2015, p. 106.

⁵⁴Roosa 2006, p. 4.

⁵⁵Roosa 2020, p. 80.

⁵⁶ibid., p. 236.

⁵⁷CNN Indonesia 2021.

⁵⁸Feith 2007, p. 91; Agung 1973, p. 202.

⁵⁹Mozingo 2007, p. 100.

⁶⁰Feith 2007.

there following the Sukiman Cabinet's anti-communist raid in August 1950.⁶¹ The culmination of this diplomatic tension occurred when Jakarta declared the Chinese Ambassador, Wang Renshu, *persona non grata* in late 1951. These events, as pointed out by Mozingo, demonstrated the Indonesian government's readiness to take risks and even provoke diplomatic ruptures with Beijing.⁶²

Under Suharto's army-backed regime, Indonesia suspended its diplomatic relations with China for more than twenty years. Throughout this period, Muslim groups consistently opposed each plan from the government to resume Jakarta's diplomatic ties with Beijing. However, in August 1990, Jakarta eventually normalized the ties. This move partly indicates that political Islam, despite its resurgence, continued to stay on the political margin, playing a minor role in Indonesia's foreign policy making until the end of Suharto's era.⁶³

In the more recent context, the general public tend to view ethnic Chinese Indonesians a projection of the People's Republic of China.⁶⁴ In other words, the public learn about China from Indonesia's ethnic Chinese. As the image of ethnic Chinese among the Islamists is not positive, China inherits a not-so-good reputation. The fact that China is a communist state exacerbates the Islamists' enmity toward the country. A 2019 opinion poll from LSI (*Lembaga Survei Indonesia*, Indonesian Survey Institute) shows that those who vote for Islamic party such as PKS (77%) and PAN (55%) view China as a threat to Indonesia.⁶⁵ This data suggest the enmity against China is stronger among the Islamists.

In post-Suharto Indonesia, political Islam has emerged as a major political force. Before proceeding to assess how this phenomenon affects Indonesia's relations with China, it is necessary to outline the contemporary political dynamics that the Islamists have helped to shape. The next section identifies the major Islamist political forces in post-Suharto Indonesia and describes their interactions with the regimes in power.

Yudhoyono, Jokowi, and the Islamic political forces

During his two-term presidency, Yudhoyono accommodated all Muslim-based and Islamist political parties in his ruling coalition. This approach to Islamic forces was merely a part of his strategy to build a highly inclusive coalition in order to ensure political stability, and thus, longevity – a strategy which originates from the highly uncertain democratic transition following the fall of Suharto's regime.⁶⁶ Incorporating major political parties across the secularist-Islamist spectrum into the ruling coalition, Yudhoyono's government received 73 and 76% of parliamentary support in his first and second presidential terms respectively.⁶⁷ On the other hand, Jokowi has taken a rather selective approach toward the Islamic political parties, in fact toward the other parties as well, in building the governing coalition. During his two presidential terms, Jokowi incorporated some Islamic or Muslim-based parties into his coalition. Like Yudhoyono, he has sought to seek a parliamentary majority to deal with a highly competitive inter-elite struggle. Still, there has been a limit to the inclusivity of his coalition. Jokowi has been consistent in disengaging PKS a major Islamist political party, as well as Yudhoyono's Democratic Party (Partai Demokrat).

Moreover, political Islam could not be associated only with the struggle of actors operating within the established party system. Post-Suharto Indonesia also sees the rise of Islamic extra-parliamentary forces; the most prominent one is FPI. This Islamic vigilante group became publicly known only after General Wiranto, then commander of armed forces, incorporated it into the security community (*Pamswakarsa*) forces, a fusion of civil militias mainly formed in November 1998 to defend interim

⁶¹This raid specifically targeted thousands of PKI members and ethnic Chinese individuals.

⁶²Mozingo 2007, p. 101.

⁶³Sukma 1999.

⁶⁴Laksmna 2011.

⁶⁵LSI 2019.

⁶⁶After twenty months in office, President Abdurrahman Wahid was impeached by the parliament. He reportedly learned a valuable lesson: the more parties included in a ruling coalition, the higher the leader's chance to stay in power until the end of presidency (Sherlock 2015). See also, Slater 2004.

⁶⁷Muhtadi 2015.

Habibie's presidency against pro-reform student movement.⁶⁸ FPI gains credibility as a power broker not from its relatively small membership, but from its ability to inflict violence and, most importantly, to organize and mobilize the masses. What has been among the group's strongest appeal, especially for the urban poor and lower middle class, is its use of Islamic populist narratives and aggressive rhetoric in articulating their everyday resentments.⁶⁹

Another Islamic extra-parliamentary political force that also deserves mention is HTI, an offshoot of the transnational Party of Liberation (*Hizb ut-Tahrir*).⁷⁰ HTI differs from FPI in at least two aspects: first, its strong adherence to non-violent approaches though it does not reject the use of violent rhetoric, and second, its transnational aspiration toward restoring the Islamic Caliphate.⁷¹ Similar to FPI, nevertheless, this organization developed strong mass-mobilization capability.⁷² In the following year, with the help of the Yudhoyono's government, HTI organized International Caliphate Conference in Jakarta, attracting the participation of about 100,000 Muslims. The group made the conference look much more like a rally, suggesting that HTI had been transformed into one of the largest Muslim organizations in Indonesia and one of the largest and leading chapters of *Hizb ut-Tahrir* in the world.⁷³

The Yudhoyono administration had taken an accommodationist toward both Islamic extra-parliamentary forces. President Yudhoyono, for example, had never gone beyond the issue of threats to disband the group despite FPI's brutality toward religious minority groups. Members of Yudhoyono's cabinet also turned a blind eye to FPI's frequent acts of violence and even portrayed the group as an asset to the nation. These embracing attitudes toward the group and the fact that FPI had relatively enjoyed impunity indicate that the group "must have had support from key elements of the Yudhoyono administration."⁷⁴

In addition, the Yudhoyono administration also granted what HTI needed for the expansion of HTI's activities and network: the recognition of the organization's status as a legal mass organization.⁷⁵ The administration could not be more accommodative toward HTI when it took no action against the conduct of the 2007 International Caliphate Conference. This large mass gathering persuaded Indonesian Muslims to transfer their allegiance from their country to the Islamic Caliphate that the *Hizb ut-Tahrir* was seeking to restore. More importantly, both FPI and HTI had gained access to government patronage through accommodation within state-sponsored MUI.⁷⁶

Unlike his immediate predecessor, Jokowi has been reluctant to accommodate the aspirations and interests of the Islamic extra-parliamentary forces. In his ascent to power, he became greatly indebted to PDIP of which he is a member. The party "had long presented itself as the bastion against the Islamization of national politics"⁷⁷ and its matriarch, Megawati Sukarnoputri, put that into practice during her presidency by confronting and isolating the Islamist forces.⁷⁸ Similarly, Jokowi during his governorship in Jakarta also showed a tendency to ignore FPI and even excluded it and other vigilante groups from government patronage.⁷⁹ To large extent, these contexts help explain why Islamist forces supported Jokowi's rival, Prabowo Subianto, during the 2014 presidential elections. It should be

⁶⁸It should be noted, nevertheless, that Wiranto's mobilization of militias and vigilantes as a means to fight for power is not unprecedented in Indonesian politics. Under Suharto's authoritarian rule, militias were also mobilized to boost the ruling party's electoral prospect, and even institutionalized to bolster the legitimacy of those in power, as well as to serve the interests of politico-business elites in their quest of both power and capital (Mudhoffir 2017). See also, Mietzner 2008; Wilson 2008.

⁶⁹Wilson 2014.

⁷⁰van Bruinessen 2013.

⁷¹Ward 2009.

⁷²Osman 2010a, p. 617.

⁷³Osman 2010b.

⁷⁴Bush 2015, p. 248.

⁷⁵Nuraniyah 2020.

⁷⁶This further allowed these two Islamist groups to have equal standing with the country's two largest Muslim organizations, Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah. See also, Mietzner and Muhtadi 2018; Nuraniyah 2020.

⁷⁷Power 2018, p. 312.

⁷⁸Mietzner 2018.

⁷⁹Mudhoffir 2017.

noted that during the presidential campaign, Prabowo's camp attacked Jokowi's credentials by portraying Jokowi as "secularist, communist, and agent of foreign interests" and by spreading rumors that Jokowi "was the son of a Singaporean Chinese."⁸⁰

The opportunity for FPI to challenge Jokowi's regime and diminish his prospect for re-election arose in a heated political situation leading to the 2017 Jakarta's gubernatorial election. This political event in the nation's capital could not be more favorable for a power broker like the FPI, as the country's political kingmakers put up their own candidate to compete. FPI vilified the ethnic background of Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (also known as Ahok), the incumbent PDIP-backed candidate as well as Jokowi's former vice-governor in Jakarta, by simply referencing his identity as a Christian Chinese descendant. In one of his campaign rallies, Ahok told the Muslim voters that he did not mind if they refuse to vote for him, lest they are fooled by using Al-Maidah 51 – a Quranic verse which forbids non-Muslims to govern the Muslims.

FPI, as well as HTI, immediately exploited the situation by alleging that Ahok had blasphemed Islam and further demanding his imprisonment. These two Islamist groups then mobilized the Muslim masses to conduct two large public demonstrations in November and December 2016, in which more than 200,00 and 500,000 people took part respectively. Many people believe that these rallies are the two largest mass mobilizations in the nation's history. These events indicated how the Islamists' organizational capacity and network had largely expanded – thanks to Yudhoyono's accommodationist approach during his ten-year presidency.⁸¹ In addition, the events that led to Ahok's eventual electoral defeat also become a testimony of how Indonesia's political kingmakers and politico-business elites could exploit the hard-line Islamists' mass-mobilization capacity to shape a political situation to their own favor.⁸²

Jokowi's initial responses to this Islamist mobilization included attempts to make conciliatory gestures. Seeking to manage the political tension, he was present at one of the rallies to directly address the protesters. This action required Jokowi to share the stage with Rizieq Shihab, the FPI's leader, while facing hundreds of thousands of demonstrators, something that only boosted FPI's credibility as power broker. Jokowi further bowed to the pressure from the masses by letting Ahok to be prosecuted and having his case to be taken to court. Eventually, Ahok was found guilty of blasphemy and sentenced to a two-year jail term.

The failure of these accommodating gestures in moderating the mass movement then paved the way for repressive measures. In this regard, the FPI and HTI were among the primary targets. Seeking to destroy Rizieq Shihab's credibility as a religious Islamic leader, the national police launched investigations into selected criminal cases, leading to a portrayal of the FPI leader as a felon and even a pervert.⁸³ This criminalization campaign eventually forced Rizieq to be in exile in Saudi Arabia for three years. During Jokowi's era, the Government Regulation in Lieu of Law (*Peraturan Pemerintah Pengganti Undang-Undang* or *Perppu*) No.2/2017 was issued to allow it to disband social organization without prior judicial process. This new law was clearly meant to be a tool to ban HTI because the Islamist organization was the first and only organization dissolved since the law was issued.⁸⁴

This section has presented how Yudhoyono's and Jokowi's administrations have dealt with Islamic politic forces both inside and outside the established party system. While the former sought to be inclusive, the latter has not been hesitant in excluding or even confronting some Islamic groups. With such an arrangement, PKS, FPI, and HTI are the Islamist forces that have lost the spoils of office and access to state infrastructure and resources since Jokowi's rise to power. The following section then describes how these internal political dynamics have shaped the Islamists responses to Jakarta's growing ties with Beijing under both Yudhoyono's and Jokowi's administrations.

⁸⁰Mietzner and Muhtadi 2018.

⁸¹Mietzner and Muhtadi 2018.

⁸²Hadiz 2017.

⁸³Mietzner 2018.

⁸⁴Power 2018.

The two governments' China policies and the attitude of political Islam elements

Among the Indonesian masses, there is a common perception that Jokowi has boosted Indonesia's economy through cooperation with China. Jokowi is perceived by the political Islam elements as the most China-friendly leader in the nation's history – often a derogatory description. In fact, Yudhoyono adopted a similar attitude toward China to develop the country's economy. Yet, he is free from the disapproval of the political Islamists. This section discusses the response of the political Islamists toward Yudhoyono's and Jokowi's China policies on controversial issues related to foreign workers, ASEAN-China Free Trade Area (ACFTA), and the Natuna waters.

ACFTA, foreign workers, Ahok case, and the political Islam responses

Economic development is a high priority for Yudhoyono's government. Yudhoyono believes that strong relations with China are indispensable for boosting the country's economy. One year after he assumed presidency, Yudhoyono upgraded China–Indonesia relations to strategic partnership. Despite several cabinet reshuffles, strategic partnership continued to be a key policy agenda.⁸⁵ Trade ministers from Mari Elka Pangestu, to Gita Wirjawan, and Muhammad Lutfi suggested that closer relations with China would set a clear target for trade and investment cooperation, accelerate Indonesia's economic development, and leave a legacy for Yudhoyono's administration. As part of its strategy to boost bilateral trade with China, Yudhoyono's government supported the ACFTA.

Nevertheless, the full implementation of the free trade deal in 2010 had fueled public anxiety.⁸⁶ Although the ACFTA is essentially a multilateral free trade deal, the utmost concern of its implementation was Indonesia's expanding bilateral trade with China. The narrative of the way made-in-China products had flooded (*membanjiri*) the domestic market started to emerge in the national media as early as 2004.⁸⁷ As China replaced Japan as Indonesia's largest import market in 2006, the media put forward an image of how Indonesia's market had already been “under the grip of the dragon” (*di bawah cengkraman sang naga*) following “the invasion” (*serbuan*) of made-in-China products and further highlighted how the business community had been powerless (*tidak berdaya*) to compete.⁸⁸

These concerns were intensified after Indonesia's trade balance with China turned into deficit for the first time in 2008 and culminated when the ACFTA was put into effect completely.⁸⁹ Local industries were reportedly struggling to compete in the domestic market and many of them were forced to close down, affecting the livelihood of many workers.⁹⁰ Hence, Yudhoyono's government received strong pressure from some sections of the society to either renegotiate, delay the implementation, or withdraw from the free trade deal, showing that the government stood by the people.⁹¹

It should be noted that opposition to the ACFTA proved to be minimal and short-lived. The efforts to undermine Indonesia's commitment to the ACFTA were primarily made by the Ministry of Industry and the private sectors represented by Indonesian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (KADIN) and Association of Indonesian Entrepreneurs (API). In response to their concerns, a bilateral talk was organized in April 2010 in which the Indonesian Trade Minister met with her Chinese counterpart. Although they were disappointed with the government's failure to cancel or delay the implementation of the trade deal, the end of the talk also marked the decline of their expression of disagreement to the government's commitment to the ACFTA. The government claimed that the talk was successful in accommodating the interests of industries and private sectors, leading to the renegotiation of up to 228 tariff lines with China.⁹²

⁸⁵Farneubun 2017.

⁸⁶Chandra and Lontoh 2011.

⁸⁷Waskita 2004; Wibowo 2004.

⁸⁸Hadi 2008; Tempo 2007; Wibowo 2006.

⁸⁹The authors thank Rakhmat Syarip for highlighting this point. See also, Kompas 2010c; Yunanto 2009.

⁹⁰Kompas 2010a; Kompas 2010b; Kompas 2010d.

⁹¹Juwana 2010; Kompas 2011.

⁹²Chandra and Lontoh 2011.

In addition, civil society organizations, labor unions, and farmer groups also launched aggressive public campaign through social media and organized mass demonstrations in Jakarta and other main cities to attract opposition from wider sections of the society.⁹³ Still, they only managed to attract a small amount of attention and finally failed to sustain their movement beyond 2010. It is beyond the scope of this paper to explain why the opposition to the ACFTA was a short-lived one. It was nevertheless apparent that the movement at that time lacked concerted support from parties concerned, both at the elite and mass levels to coordinate actions and share resources in order to mobilize and sustain a bigger resistance.⁹⁴

Widespread concern about Chinese domination in the domestic market caused by the massive influx of Chinese products and the waves of opposition that accompanied it only provoked limited responses from the Islamic political forces. Criticism against the government's commitment to the ACFTA mainly came from the PKS, while Islamic extra-parliamentary forces were relatively silent. One of PKS parliamentarians, for example, stated that the free trade deal "will harm the *pribumi*'s businesses and increase unemployment ... If [the deal] is implemented, oranges from Medan or apple from Malang will be missing [from the market], all substituted by fruits from China."⁹⁵ Interestingly, the party sided with the non-ruling parties to ensure the formation of the parliamentary working committee (*panitia kerja*) and even special committee (*panitia khusus*) to oversee the implementation of the ACFTA.⁹⁶ According to Rakhmat Syarip, nevertheless, all maneuvers made in the parliament at that time "have never resulted in either a formal cancellation request nor an interpellation meeting."⁹⁷

The narratives about invasion from China resurfaced in Jokowi's presidency, but this time, such a threat was arguably manifested in the massive inflow of the mainland Chinese. In mid-2015, national media reported that thousands of workers from China, especially the unskilled ones, had entered Indonesia to work on Chinese investment projects.⁹⁸ The opposition groups blamed Jokowi for over-accommodating Chinese foreign workers at the expense of local workers. Jokowi's government was questioned for allowing the influx of unskilled foreign laborers because millions of Indonesians were still unemployed.

According to the official data from the Ministry of Manpower, Chinese workers have been in Indonesia since the Yudhoyono era. Chinese workers have been the largest group of foreign workers in Indonesia since 2007.⁹⁹ In 2017, the number of Chinese workers was 24,800.¹⁰⁰ In 2015, when the issue of Chinese foreign workers sparked heated controversy, the minister of manpower Hanif Dhakiri also stated that the number of foreign workers was 54,953.¹⁰¹ In contrast, in 2012 and 2013, when Yudhoyono was in power, the number of foreign workers was 77,000 and 72,000 respectively.

Qualitatively, the regulation on foreign workers under Yudhoyono's administration (Perpres No. 72/2014) was somehow loose. There was no sanction or penalty in violation of the regulation, no obligation to provide social insurance, and no type of occupation can be allocated for foreign workers.¹⁰² Under Jokowi's administration, there are penalties for employers of foreign workers who violate the regulation (Perpres No. 20/2018). This regulation also specifies occupations that can be held by foreign workers and the timeline based on conditions of the domestic human resources market.

This issue of Chinese foreign workers re-emerged with greater magnitude at the end of 2016, coinciding with the Islamist mobilization against Ahok's alleged blasphemy. A rumor claiming that ten million Chinese workers would be coming to Indonesia was widely circulated in the social media,

⁹³Syarip 2020.

⁹⁴The authors thank Rakhmat Syarip for highlighting this point.

⁹⁵PKS Grogol 2019.

⁹⁶JPNN 2010.

⁹⁷Syarip 2020, pp. 416–17.

⁹⁸Suryadinata 2017; Tempo 2015.

⁹⁹Wiwoho 2018.

¹⁰⁰Hamdani 2018.

¹⁰¹Fauzi 2015.

¹⁰²Jannah 2018.

especially after Jokowi made the statement on December 5, 2016 that his government would like to have ten million Chinese tourists visit the country.¹⁰³ In response, Jokowi later stated that there were only 21,000 Chinese workers in Indonesia at that time, but his remark had little effect in curbing the spread of the hoax in social media, which was accompanied by the rise of anti-China/Chinese sentiment.¹⁰⁴

FPI, as well as HTI, were the leading actors promoting anti-government narratives, thereby raising public anxiety over the Chinese worker issue. On December 9, 2016, Syihab tweeted how Jokowi designated the Ahok-backed reclamation project in North Jakarta to welcome around 25 million Chinese nationals, arguing that Ahok's electoral victory would only pave the way for communist domination, first in Jakarta and then the whole country.¹⁰⁵ HTI in fact had been consistent in promoting this narrative about the threat of sinicization (*Cinaiasi*) presented by the reclamation project since mid-2006. It organized a series of public seminars, seeking to portray how the government had sold Indonesia to China by bringing in massive Chinese capital and workers.¹⁰⁶ Echoing this, Syihab through his tweets further claimed that Indonesia was becoming a vassal state of the anti-Islam and Communist China.¹⁰⁷ While for the government, FPI and HTI were merely spreading hoaxes about the Chinese workers. Both groups claimed that promoting such narratives was part of their efforts to defend Islam.¹⁰⁸

PKS also contributed to the intense public debate by further mobilizing opposition against the government. After the spread of a rumor about the inflow of ten million workers from China, one of the party parliamentarians warned that Jokowi's government would bring Indonesia under the danger of neocolonialism. He argued that the worker's entry marked the start of China's economic domination in Indonesia, and that such economic domination would lead to political domination.¹⁰⁹ In social media, moreover, *@maspiyungan*, a Twitter account that was historically associated with PKS, was reportedly among the most active ones in using the issue to generate negative sentiments against Jokowi and Ahok, as well as the Chinese.¹¹⁰ When the government claimed that the massive influx of the Chinese workers was a hoax, the party sided those who were concerned with it. The party chairman, for example, made a public statement, arguing that it was normal for the people to question the government because the authorities provide more confusing than reliable information about the issue.¹¹¹

Contrasting approaches to the Natuna issue

The two governments' different approaches to the Natuna issue led to different responses from the Islamists. Yudhoyono and Jokowi used different strategies to deal with China's maritime rights violation in the Natuna waters. During Yudhoyono's presidency, the South China Sea (SCS) issue escalated, while Chinese maritime rights violation in the Natuna waters was no less frequent than similar cases in the Jokowi era (Table 1).

Yudhoyono preferred to handle the matter behind the scene.¹¹² His government tended to keep secret from the public the incidents that could cause chaos and hurt relations with Beijing. Furthermore, Yudhoyono was also concerned about Indonesia's roles as an honest broker and a confidence builder in the region. Surprisingly, unlike Jokowi who is burdened with "China's pawn" stigma, Yudhoyono's soft attitude toward China's violation of Indonesia's maritime rights in the Natuna waters did not face any disapproval from the Islamists.

¹⁰³Suryadinata 2017.

¹⁰⁴Tempo 2017.

¹⁰⁵Islam Cyber Center 2016; Tempo 2017.

¹⁰⁶Tribun Rakyat 2016.

¹⁰⁷Portal-Islam 2016.

¹⁰⁸Tempo 2017.

¹⁰⁹PKS 2016a.

¹¹⁰Tempo 2017.

¹¹¹Iman 2017.

¹¹²Suryadinata 2016.

Table 1. The incidents in the Natuna waters involving Chinese fishermen vessels (and China Coast Guard) during the Yudhoyono presidency

Date	Incidents
April 17, 2008	The Indonesian Ministry of Maritime and Fishery Affairs (KKP) arrested six Chinese fishing vessels with their 58 crew members. ¹
June 23, 2009	Chinese fishing vessel with 77 crew members were arrested by KKP for illegally fishing in Natuna's EEZ. ²
Around May and June 2010	An Indonesian ship was threatened at gunpoint by Chinese vessels off the Natuna Island for arresting Chinese fishermen. ³
March 26, 2013	Indonesian Maritime Patrol vessel KP Hiu Macan 001 arrested a Chinese vessel for illegally fishing in Indonesia's EEZ in the Natuna waters. Indonesia's attempt was intercepted by China Coast Guard. ⁴

¹Kompas 2008.²Kompas 2009.³Hellendorf and Kellner 2014.⁴Garuda Militer 2013.

During Jokowi's presidency, every reported Chinese incursion to Indonesia waters, particularly in the Natuna waters, became a media headline. There is a sense of anxiety from the public that Indonesia's sovereign rights might be threatened by China, the superpower. This worry provides an opportunity for the opposition and dissent groups to politicize the issue and perpetuate the public perception that Jokowi takes a soft approach toward China.

Responding to China's maritime rights violation in the Natuna waters, FPI reprimanded the Jokowi government for being harsh toward Muslims yet tolerant toward China's maritime rights violation in Indonesia's waters.¹¹³ PKS for instance, specifically directed the criticism at Defence Minister Prabowo Subianto – who was its political ally in the 2014 and 2019 presidential elections – for being too soft toward China in the Natuna issue.¹¹⁴ Prabowo, the former leader of the opposition camp but currently a part of Jokowi government, has become a target of censure. The same criticism was also delivered by the 212 Alumni Brotherhood.¹¹⁵ This Islamic group consists of those who organized and conducted the series of anti-Ahok rallies (Defending Islam Action) in 2016 and 2017 in Jakarta. The total members of this group are reportedly seven million.¹¹⁶

In fact, in two reported China's maritime rights violation in the Natuna waters in 2016 and 2020, the government sent diplomatic protests to Beijing. President Jokowi, along with relevant senior officials, visited the Natuna after the incidents. In June 23, 2016, Jokowi boarded Indonesian navy warship KRI Imam Bonjol and headed toward Natuna and led a restricted meeting to send a strong signal to Beijing.¹¹⁷ The same gesture was made following China's maritime rights violation to Indonesia's EEZ as Jokowi visited the Natuna Islands on January 8, 2020 to assert Indonesia's sovereignty and sovereign rights over the islands.¹¹⁸ Moreover, Jokowi government sent two diplomatic notes to the UN Secretary General on May 26 and June 12, 2020 to disprove China's South China Sea claim by quoting the 2016 Tribunal Award which is fiercely rejected by Beijing.

This section has shown how the widely perceived threats of China's economic domination in Indonesia and maneuvers in the Natuna waters do not always lead the Islamists to exploit anti-China sentiment to challenge the government. This article argues that the Islamists' position *vis-à-vis* the ruling coalition has shaped their responses to perceived threats from China.

¹¹³CNN Indonesia 2020a.¹¹⁴CNBC Indonesia 2020.¹¹⁵CNN Indonesia 2020b.¹¹⁶CNN Indonesia 2019.¹¹⁷Kwok 2016.¹¹⁸The Jakarta Post 2020.

Although Yudhoyono coalition's accommodation did not prevent PKS from challenging the government's commitment to ACFTA, it had some impact on the extent to which the party is willing to spend resources to mobilize the opposition. The party was indeed among a few political parties which proposed the formation of a parliamentary working committee on the issue in question. However, it did not put in effort to establish the actual committee or to use other parliamentary mechanisms to effectively challenge the government. Becoming a non-ruling party under Jokowi's presidency, PKS voiced strong criticism against his government on the Chinese worker issue as expected. This time, nevertheless, the party went beyond parliamentary mechanisms by officially supporting the FPI-led Islamist mobilization against Ahok's alleged blasphemy.¹¹⁹ This mobilization reportedly benefited from the party's skills and experiences as the first party in the country that carries out Internet-based electoral campaigns.¹²⁰ Through these maneuvers, the PKS sought to create a larger opposition against the government on the Chinese worker issue because the issue had already been extensively used to exploit anti-China/Chinese sentiment both in the cyberspace and the actual world.

Access to state infrastructures has also seemed to play a role in shaping the responses of Islamist extra-parliamentary forces to the perceived China's economic threat to Indonesia. Unlike the PKS, both FPI and HTI made no response to the economic threat posed by the influx of made-in-China products in the domestic Indonesian market. This phenomenon occurred during Yudhoyono's presidency which took an accommodative approach toward Islamist groups. Being denied access to government patronage under Jokowi's presidency, these Islamist groups took up the issue of the influx of foreign workers from China, even creating rumors and fabricating hoaxes around the issue, to promote strong anti-government narratives. Both groups further exploited this issue to fuel anti-Chinese sentiment and mobilized Muslim masses against Ahok's alleged blasphemy case. This kind of mass demonstration against perceived expansion of China's influence in Indonesia is something that was absent from the public scene during Yudhoyono's presidency.

Yudhoyono and Jokowi face the same challenge in defending maritime rights in the Natuna waters. The frequency and intensity of China's violation during the two governments are on the same level. However, Yudhoyono handled the Natuna issue behind the scenes and avoided straining relations with Beijing. On the contrary, Jokowi is openly against China's maritime rights violation. He has adopted a tougher stance against China since he recognized the 2016 Tribunal Award. Interestingly, Yudhoyono did not receive any censure from the Islamists; on the other hand, Jokowi's assertiveness does not prevent the Islamists from criticizing the government for being too soft to China.

The Islamists did not have a reason to delegitimize Yudhoyono's policy in the Natuna waters because they enjoy power sharing with the regime. No matter how resolute the Jokowi government is in defending Indonesia's maritime rights in the Natuna waters against China's EEZ violation, the Islamists always found a way to perpetuate the perception of Jokowi as a pawn of Beijing. When excluded from the government, Islamists tend to activate enmity toward China and portray the Jokowi government as pro-China in an attempt to delegitimize Jokowi before the Muslim population. As explained by Eko Sulisty, the deputy of information and political communication section at the Presidential Office, there is a move to discredit the government by associating Jokowi's administration with China. This action will raise suspicion of the threat of communism and eventually lead to the perception that Jokowi is anti-Islam.¹²¹

This article also argues the domestic political setting had seemingly further determined whether or not the narrative of China's economic domination would be used to fuel anti-China/Chinese sentiment. As described, initial media coverage on the issue of the massive influx of Chinese workers did not immediately trigger reactions from the Islamists. During the heated domestic political situation approaching the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election, the issue was under intense public scrutiny. During the election, the Islamists were among the actors of interest.

¹¹⁹PKS 2016b.

¹²⁰Lim 2017.

¹²¹Gultom 2017.

The electoral contest had prompted the Islamist forces to exploit the narrative of China's economic domination to serve their political interests. FPI exploited the issue and even spread hoaxes and conspiracy theories about it to further generate anti-China/Chinese sentiment against the ethnic-Chinese incumbent gubernatorial candidate following the accusation that he insulted Islam. In so doing, FPI sought to prevent Ahok – who had followed Jokowi's footsteps by taking a non-accommodative approach to the group – from staying in power. The group also intended to demonstrate to Ahok's rivals how powerful and useful its mobilization capacity had been in serving their interest during the electoral contest. As they – including the PKS and Gerindra whose candidate eventually won the election – aligned their interests with the FPI and further benefited from its actions against Ahok, the Islamist extra-parliamentary group then expected to reap the spoils of electoral victory. This kind of electoral setting failed to produce the same effect during the Yudhoyono's presidency as the Islamist forces did not compete for power, thanks to Yudhoyono's accommodation.

Conclusion

Yudhoyono's and Jokowi's governments adopt welcoming attitude toward economic cooperation with China. As described above, President Yudhoyono put no less effort compared to President Jokowi into engaging with China. Moreover, Yudhoyono's and Jokowi's governments dealt with serious challenges regarding Indonesia's economic exchanges with China. The former had to deal with the implementation of ACFTA causing the inflow of Chinese commodities in Indonesian market, which is harmful to small and medium businesses. The latter dealt with an influx of Chinese foreign workers as a consequence of Chinese investment. The increasing number of Chinese workers in Indonesia is perceived as threat that could deprive local Indonesians of job opportunities.

In the maritime domain, nevertheless, Yudhoyono's and Jokowi's governments take divergent approaches. Both governments face the same level of menace from China's violation of Indonesia's EEZ in the Natuna waters. Yudhoyono chose to deal with the matter behind the curtain lest it offends Beijing. On the contrary, Jokowi shows an assertive posture against China's violation by inspecting the Natuna Islands and recognizes the 2016 Tribunal Award that invalidates China's claim.

In all of the abovementioned cases, the Islamists' responses show strong criticism against Jokowi's China policies, while there was relatively little significant opposition against Yudhoyono's policies. The Islamists are consistent in labelling Jokowi's government as China's puppet yet show little critical attitude toward Yudhoyono's government. The difference in the Islamists' responses to Yudhoyono's and Jokowi's China policy can be attributed to the two governments' attitude toward the sharing of their power with the Islamist political forces. In the Yudhoyono era, the Islamists did not exploit the negative sentiment as they did not compete for power, thanks to Yudhoyono's accommodation. In the Jokowi era, since the Islamist forces are excluded from the ruling coalition, they forcefully activated the triangular animosities of CCC to delegitimize the perceived Chinese-accommodating, pro-China, and communist-tolerant regime.

The Islamists' main consideration in activating the negative sentiments against CCC is more about power sharing. In other words, their actions are primarily directed toward the ruling coalition. The position of the Indonesian Islamists regarding the country's relations with China is essentially pragmatic. This finding confirms the argument of Azyumardi Azra, a reputable Islamic scholar in Indonesia, who contends that the adoption of Islamic symbolism/formalism by political forces in post-Suharto era is predominantly driven by a "lust for power among Muslim political leader."¹²²

It is important to note that the findings of this study do not necessarily imply that the Islamists within the ruling coalition would contribute positively to bilateral ties. The current government, which excludes and even coerces the Islamists is able to address domestic challenges. Sino-Indonesia relations under Jokowi is expanding more rapidly than during Yudhoyono's years though the later included the Islamists in the government and faced minimum resistance from them in managing China's policy. The status of Indonesia–China relations depends on the government capacity to navigate the bilateral cooperation.

¹²²Azra 2004.

The domestic contexts described above only highlight how the Islamists have the capacity to present unique challenges to Indonesia–China relations. The turbulence around the issues of China’s foreign workers and China’s violation of Indonesia’s maritime rights in the Natuna waters voiced by the Islamists during Jokowi’s first term does not suggest the Islamists’ intention to disrupt the bilateral relations.

It is nevertheless beyond the scope of this article to put forward suggestions concerning Jakarta’s approach in dealing with the Islamists challenge while managing its ties with Beijing. After all, the findings of this article only suggest that the Islamists are concerned about access to political power, not boycotting Indonesia–China relations. In other words, they might complicate the relations, but not without limitations. The future management of Indonesia–China relations must take this matter into consideration. China should view Indonesia’s internal dynamic in constructive manner, more as navigable complexities than a formidable barrier to its efforts to build closer and wider interaction with the country. On the other hand, Indonesia should not expand its economic and strategic engagement with the rising power at the expense of its commitment to uphold democratic principles, including transparency, accountability, and public participation.

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