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## Islam in Indonesian Foreign Policy: The Limits of Muslim Solidarity for the Rohingya and Uighurs

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With more than 88% of its 264 million citizens professing the Islamic faith, Indonesia has more adherents than in all Arab states combined. Islam has long served as a source of social values and norms in Indonesian society, thereby playing an important role in political legitimation. Since foreign policy typically reflects a country's values, one would expect Islam to have long played a role in Indonesia's external relations as well. Instead, Suharto's authoritarian regime (1965-1998) repressed political Islam at home and banned it from Indonesian foreign policy. Only during the democratic era has Islam played a role in Indonesian foreign policy. Incorporating it into foreign policy is at once a reflection of domestic values, a result of bottom-up domestic pressure, and a strategic response to a post-September 11 environment in which Indonesia's democracy, reputation for toleration, and moderate form of Islam were perceived as domestic assets that could be leveraged in foreign policy.

In contrast to the adoption of democracy as a value in foreign policy, which generated little domestic discord, the use of Islam in foreign policy was more contentious. The rise of political Islam is a defining feature of Indonesia's reform era. Just as policymakers believed that promoting democracy would strengthen political reforms at home, some policymakers believed that projecting a moderate Islamic image abroad would trigger a domestic "feedback loop" and help strengthen Indonesia's moderate tradition. But in the wake of the 2002 Bali bombings that revealed the existence of a home-grown terrorist threat, some Indonesian leaders—both secular and Islamic-- believed that using religion in foreign policy would empower the radicals, not the moderates, by giving them another "Islamic" tool to wield against the government. Noted Muslim scholar Azumardi Azra has described the role of Islam in foreign policy as a "policy of ambiguity."<sup>1</sup> Ambiguity refers to the fact that on the one hand, the government pays attention to issues with strong Islamic connections, but on the other it plays down the Islamic factor that connects it to these issues. The Muslim community in Indonesia is not monolithic, so the government must be careful not to take a stand that generates opposition at home.

Under President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (2004-2014), some policy makers believed that Indonesia's experience with economic development, political reform, and Islamic terrorism gave it the authority to speak to the challenges facing the Muslim world. In a speech in Saudi Arabia, Yudhoyono reviewed many problems facing the Muslim community, including "Islamophobia," and argued that Muslims should respond by embracing "technology and modernity and a culture of excellence."<sup>2</sup> Noting that Islam was not only a religion of peace, but also one of progress, Yudhoyono called for an Islamic renaissance and urged his Muslim brethren to embrace globalization, reach out to non-Muslims, and cooperate against terrorism.

Such speeches have a number of targets and goals. First, they are directed at the global Muslim community in an attempt to influence its ideas and actions. Indonesia seeks to illustrate that there are multiple interpretations of Islam, and to combat the tendency to equate Islam with the conservative sect known as Wahhabism. There is a realist motivation here, given the transnational threat of terrorism. If Indonesia can help shape the debate over what it means to be a Muslim majority country in the twenty-first century and promote the idea that Islam, modernity and democracy can coexist, it will have created a supportive external environment for the consolidation of its own domestic political vision.

Second, such arguments are also directed at a domestic audience. Efforts to promote Indonesia as a democratic, tolerant, modern society abroad serve to reinforce these values at home, thereby weakening the influence of extremists. With the rise of Muslim majoritarianism, however, Indonesian domestic politics is becoming less tolerant of liberal values and of minorities, thereby eroding the credibility of Indonesia's international image as a moderate Muslim society.

Third, such speeches are targeted at Western audiences, particularly the U.S. Yudhoyono's tenure coincided with the height of American efforts to promote democracy in the Middle East under Bush as well as President Obama's call for a new beginning in U.S. relations with the Muslim world. With the decline of such efforts under Trump, the incentives for Indonesia to project such an image have declined.

How rising religious sectarianism will influence Indonesian foreign policy moving forward is unclear. Jokowi's election platform had numerous references to Indonesia's free and active foreign policy doctrine, the need to support the Palestinian people, and calls for Indonesia to promote a "middle way" form of Islam that is neither liberal nor radical.<sup>3</sup> It lacked many of the references to democracy promotion that existed under Yudhoyono. The mission statement mentions inter-religious dialogues as a platform to promote Indonesian soft power, but these have always been on the margins of Indonesian policy.

Public opinion on issues with a Muslim connection can serve as a constraint on Indonesian foreign policy. When the U.S. moved its Israeli embassy to Jerusalem, the American embassy in Indonesia became the site of massive street protests. Similarly, Indonesia protested Australia's December 2018 announcement of its plan to follow the U.S. lead, and delayed signing a free-trade agreement with

Australia until after Canberra announced its support for a two-state solution with a Palestinian capital in East Jerusalem.<sup>4</sup> Indonesia has always supported Palestinian independence, but in the Sukarno and Suharto eras justified this position on the basis of anti-colonialism, a secular value, not religion. Today, when Indonesians of all stripes want to see a two-state solution, Indonesia is a strong advocate of the Palestinian cause in the UN and has never recognized Israel. Indonesia has at numerous times offered its good offices to help mediate the PLO-Hamas divide because it believes a key lesson from its own independence battle is that unity is a precondition for independence.

The Islamic factor manifests itself in Indonesian foreign policy in two primary ways. First, it is reflected in a desire to have closer relations with the broader Muslim world. This desire is also driven in part by the goal of enhancing economic ties with wealthy Gulf states, and in part by the goal of gaining legitimacy among an increasingly pious population -- both realist uses of religion. According to Dewi Fortuna Anwar, the “greater interest in enhancing relations with Islamic countries has more to do with the expected economic gains than with the issue of Islam as a common faith and the problems it faces in today’s globalizing world.”<sup>5</sup>

Second, the Islamic factor is reflected in policy toward conflicts in which Muslims are victimized, since Islam prescribes solidarity among Muslims when some of them are victims in conflict. Traditionally, this impetus manifested itself mostly in Indonesian policy toward the Middle East, particularly in support for Palestine independence, opposition to the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, opposition to the 2003 Iraq War, and condemnation of Israel’s use of force against Lebanon and in the Gaza strip.<sup>6</sup> More recently, it has influenced Indonesian policy toward the atrocities committed against the Rohingya and Uighur populations in Myanmar and China respectively.

### **Indonesian Policy toward the Rohingya**

Indonesian policy toward the Rohingya pits the value of Muslim solidarity against three realist considerations: the importance of ASEAN’s non-inference norm, the value of ASEAN’s international image of solidarity, and the desire that Myanmar not fall too far into China’s orbit. In the case of Indonesia’s democracy promotion efforts in Myanmar, values and realism pushed in the same direction. Indonesian policy was driven not only by a normative belief in democracy but also by pragmatic considerations that a more politically open Myanmar would be more stable, would reduce Western pressure on ASEAN, and would reduce Myanmar’s dependence on China as Western nations responded by lifting sanctions. Myanmar’s political transition, particularly the 2015 election in which the NLD won a supermajority, was touted as a success of Indonesia’s quiet democracy promotion efforts and ASEAN’s constructive engagement policy. By contrast, Myanmar’s persecution of the Muslim Rohingya -- a group of Muslims estimated to number 1.3 million, most of whom live in Rakhine state -- has confronted Indonesian policymakers with a dilemma. Waves of violence, particularly the 2017 atrocities that drove over 700,000 Rohingya from Myanmar into neighboring Bangladesh, generated pressure on the Indonesian government to protect them as fellow Muslims, yet

Jakarta in the end decided not to support efforts by the International Criminal Court (ICC) to hold the Myanmar government accountable for genocide.

Violence against Rohingya first triggered significant domestic pressure on the Indonesian government in 2012, when three Muslim men were arrested on suspicion of raping and killing a Buddhist woman.<sup>7</sup> Estimates are that 280 Rohingya were killed in Rakhine state and another 120,000 displaced.<sup>8</sup> The Yudhoyono administration responded in a number of ways. It urged Myanmar President Thein Sein to uphold human rights, ensure transparency of information and allow international delegations to monitor the situation on the ground. Yudhoyono made a series of speeches on television, calling for a bigger role for the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), ASEAN and the UN to monitor the situation and provide humanitarian assistance. Indonesia raised the Rohingya issue in an OIC Extraordinary Summit in August 2012, which resulted in the formation of the OIC Contact Group on the Rohingya Muslim Minority. As a result of meetings Yudhoyono held with Myanmar President Thein Sein, Myanmar agreed to permit a visit by an OIC delegation to Rohingya internally displaced person camps. Former Indonesian Vice President Jusuf Kalla participated in the delegation in his capacity as chairman of the Indonesian Red Cross. During the OIC visit, Thein Sein agreed to the establishment of an OIC Humanitarian Office in Myanmar but reneged on this commitment following protests by thousands of protestors led by Buddhist monks. Myanmar did, however, permit the Red Cross to distribute relief assistance in Rakhine state.<sup>9</sup> Kalla lobbied the OIC for financial contributions, but although OIC members pledged \$25 million, the money never arrived. At the UN, Foreign Minister Natalegawa criticized the OIC for supporting the Rohingya with statements but failing to follow up with concrete assistance.

Reflecting domestic outrage, on October 10, 2012, Mahfudz Sidiq of the Islamist Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) and chairman of the DPR's Commission 1 which covers Defense, Foreign and Information Affairs summoned Foreign Minister Natalegawa to parliament to explain Indonesia's Rohingya policy. Natalegawa outlined the government's efforts to persuade Myanmar to open up to humanitarian assistance and claimed success in this endeavor. The heads of Indonesia's two major Muslim social organizations, Din Syamsyuddin of Muhammadiyah and Ma'ruf Amin of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), however, both expressed disappointment with a policy they described as too "soft."<sup>10</sup>

#### *Indonesia's Response to the Rohingya Boat People*

As Myanmar's persecution of the Rohingya continued, many fled the country with some paying smugglers to transport them out of Myanmar by boat. When the Thai government cracked down on smugglers, they began abandoning their ships at sea.<sup>11</sup> In the spring and summer of 2015, an estimated 5,000-8,000 people were left stranded at sea with Southeast Asian states refusing to let them land.<sup>12</sup> Instead, they provided food, fuel and water before pushing them back to sea, leading the UN to accuse Southeast Asian countries of playing "human ping pong" with desperate people. Indonesia and Malaysia, the countries most negatively affected, argued that they lacked the resources to provide for the refugees, and since they were not parties to the Refugee Convention, had no obligation to accept them. After the U.S. announced in May 2015 that it would be willing to accept Rohingya refugees,

Indonesia and Malaysia agreed to provide shelter to 7000 refugees on a temporary basis.<sup>13</sup> Alluding to Indonesian fears that accepting the refugees would only create incentives for others to follow, Dewi Fortuna Anwar, then a political advisor to the Vice President, stated, “We have to find ways of settling them as soon as possible without creating a new moral hazard.”<sup>14</sup> Despite the sense of Muslim solidarity, permanent resettlement was never seriously discussed.

On October 9, 2016, Rohingya militants from a new insurgent group called Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) attacked police posts, killing nine officers and escaping with firearms. The Myanmar military responded with a wave of violence against the Rohingya that displaced 30,000 within Rakhine state and left another 70,000 without adequate food and water.<sup>15</sup> The government closed off access for humanitarian aid.

Jokowi responded by sending Foreign Minister Marsudi to meet with Myanmar’s *de facto* head of state Daw Aung San Suu Kyi in Myanmar on December 6, 2016, to express Indonesia’s concerns over the violence and its readiness to provide humanitarian aid. In Myanmar, Marsudi also met with former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, whom Suu Kyi had invited to work with Myanmar officials to make recommendations on ways to improve the situation in Rakhine state. At Indonesia’s urging, Myanmar held an ASEAN Foreign Ministers’ retreat in Yangon on December 19 to discuss the Rohingya situation, and to reduce tensions between Suu Kyi and Malaysian Prime Minister Najib, who had accused Suu Kyi’s government of genocide. At a time when Myanmar was facing international pressure from many quarters, Suu Kyi distinguished between unwelcome “megaphone” diplomacy like that coming from Malaysia and what she considered quiet constructive diplomacy like that coming from Indonesia.<sup>16</sup> Myanmar did agree to accept humanitarian aid from ASEAN and on December 29, 2016, Jokowi and Jusuf Kalla, who had returned to the Vice Presidency, presided over a ceremony as relief supplies destined for Rakhine left the country, illustrating the importance of such imagery to the Indonesian public.

At this point, the government decided to base its Rohingya policy on humanitarian relief provided through civil society actors.<sup>17</sup> In part, this was out of necessity since at that time, Indonesia lacked a bilateral aid agency or legal mechanism through which the government could accept donations from private actors.<sup>18</sup> It also enabled the government to work directly with constituencies like Islamic charities that were keen advocates for the Rohingya, many of which had been involved in humanitarian activities since 2012. A January 2017 meeting between Kementrian Luar Negeri Kemlu and representatives of eleven faith-based humanitarian groups led to the formation of an umbrella organization, Indonesia Humanitarian Alliance (IHA). IHA developed a \$2 million program focusing on the development of schools and hospitals in Rakhine. Kemlu sponsored visa applications for IHA staff and made regular visits to the project sites, illustrating that IHA was considered an integral part of Indonesian humanitarian diplomacy. Marsudi visited Myanmar again in January 2017 to formally deliver relief containers and attend the inauguration of two schools, demonstrating to the Indonesian public that the government was taking constructive steps to help the Rohingya.

*The 2017 Rohingya Genocide*

An August 25, 2017, attack by ARSA against 30 police posts and an army base generated a brutal wave of retaliatory killings, rapes and burnings of entire villages by the Myanmar authorities and armed Buddhist vigilantes. In the following weeks, over 700,000 Rohingya fled the country, making it one of the largest, fastest refugee exoduses in modern times.<sup>19</sup> The violence generated significant domestic pressure on the Indonesian government, some driven by genuine outrage and some mobilized by Jokowi's political opponents interested in weakening him ahead of the 2019 elections. These efforts were led by hardline Islamist groups known as the 212 coalition, which in 2016 orchestrated the downfall of Jokowi's ally Ahok, the Chinese Christian governor of Jakarta for telling his Muslim constituents that the Koran did not forbid them from voting for non-Muslims.

Marsudi's earlier efforts enabled the government to respond quickly to this new phase of the Rohingya crisis. The existence of IHA meant that there was a mechanism for Indonesian citizens to channel their outrage by making donations to IHA's constituent groups. NU and Muhammadiyah, founding and core members of IHA, both responded by raising funds. Muhammadiyah went further, issuing an August 31, 2017 statement called "On the Genocide of the Rohingya Ethnic Group Now Taking Place in Myanmar," which called on the UN to act and urged ASEAN to abandon its non-intervention principle, take steps to protect the Rohingya, and consider freezing Myanmar's membership. Muhammadiyah also called for Aung San Suu Kyi's Nobel Prize to be revoked and urged the ICC to prosecute those responsible for the genocide.<sup>20</sup> It also called on the government to consider the possibility of taking the Rohingya in temporarily as it had done for Vietnamese refugees. According to the Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict (IPAC), this was the first and only public call for Indonesia to shelter the Rohingya but was not followed up in a sustained manner by either Muhammadiyah or the government.<sup>21</sup>

Once again, Jokowi followed a familiar pattern of high-profile diplomacy and humanitarian aid to demonstrate his administration's concern for the Rohingya. He sent Marsudi to Myanmar to urge the government to halt the violence, protect Muslims and ensure access for humanitarian organizations. On September 4, Marsudi met with Suu Kyi and Army Chief U Min Aung Hlaing and proposed a "4+1 Formula" for ending the crisis. The four key points were: restoration of stability and security; maximum restraint and a commitment to eschew violence; protection for all persons in Rakhine state; and immediate access for humanitarian assistance. The plus-one was implementation of the recommendations of Kofi Annan's Advisory Commission on Rakhine State. Marsudi then traveled to Bangladesh where she met Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to discuss conditions in the Rohingya refugee camps and reiterate Indonesia's willingness to provide humanitarian assistance. A week later, Jokowi was at the airport to witness the departure of four government Hercules transport planes loaded with humanitarian aid, and in January 2018 he visited the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar, illustrating the importance of projecting an image of supporting Muslim victims to a domestic audience.



IHA humanitarian efforts in Rakhine faced significant obstacles, including strained relations between the Myanmar and Indonesian governments over visas for Indonesian humanitarian workers and military-led violence that halted almost all relief efforts. Most Indonesian humanitarian efforts therefore shifted to Cox's Bazar, but these also became more complicated when in April 2018 the Bangladesh government began to require humanitarian workers to obtain official business visas to visit refugee camps in Cox's Bazar. Indonesia began to fear that the desperate conditions in the refugee camps, which housed some ARSA radicals, provided fertile ground for radicalization and that the radicals might form links with Indonesian Islamist groups. Following Myanmar's 2012 violence against the Rohingya, Indonesian terrorist leader Abu Bakar Bashir had sent a letter from prison, which was widely circulated over the Internet, quoting Islamic verses that he argued legitimized violent jihad against Myanmar because of its inability to protect Muslims.<sup>22</sup> This was followed in subsequent years with a series of small attempted bombings and other attacks against the Myanmar embassy in Jakarta. As IPAC has noted, "Interest in helping fellow Muslims in the Indonesian extremist community has always far exceeded knowledge of the situation or any capacity, but the concern remains that with as many Indonesians as there are now going to the camps in Cox's Bazar, some Indonesian extremists will eventually make contact with ARSA militants."<sup>23</sup>

#### *The Limits of Islamic Solidarity*

The limits of Indonesia's Muslim solidarity with the Rohingya are evident in its current policy of defending Myanmar against a range of new international pressures on the Rohingya issue, some of it coming from other Muslim majority countries. Consistent with Indonesia's longstanding opposition to sanctions and outside pressure, Indonesia has rejected policies that it believes would isolate Myanmar, jeopardize humanitarian relief, push it closer to China, and strain Jakarta's relations with the Suu Kyi government.

In November 2019, Gambia filed a case on behalf of the OIC at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) accusing Myanmar of responsibility for "an ongoing genocide" against the Rohingya.<sup>24</sup> The same month, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution on the human rights situation for Rohingya Muslims and other minorities in Myanmar. This was followed by an announcement that the ICC had approved a prosecution request to investigate crimes against humanity, which was rejected by Myanmar. According to a Kemlu official, these moves to pressure Myanmar were driven by the OIC's Rohingya contact group as a result of "a sense of solidarity with the Rohingya refugees" but "Indonesia was the only OIC member that took a different approach – we have to build trust and confidence in Myanmar so that they want to open up to us.... Pointing fingers isn't going to work."<sup>25</sup> The official Indonesian position is that improving conditions for the Rohingya in Myanmar and creating conditions for the safe, orderly and dignified repatriation of Rohingya refugees require the cooperation of the Myanmar government, something which an ICC trial makes less, not more, likely. According to Foreign Ministry spokesperson Teuku Faizasyah, "With our own approach, Indonesia tries to become part of the solution."<sup>26</sup>

Indonesia has not only refrained from supporting OIC moves to pressure Myanmar, it has also taken steps to shield Myanmar. At the UN, Indonesia was actively involved in revising the UNGA resolution so that it would be balanced in recognizing Myanmar's efforts to address the issue, as well as the role ASEAN has played through its humanitarian response agency, the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (AHA).<sup>27</sup>

Indonesia's Muslim community is divided on whether to support the ICJ case. Muhyiddin Junaidi, a prominent Muhammadiyah figure who is also the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI)'s director of international affairs said that the MUI fully supported the decision to take Myanmar to the ICJ and that this decision "has to be supported by Indonesia and the international community in order to uphold the dignity of 2 billion Muslims around the world."<sup>28</sup> In contrast, NU adopted a position more aligned with the government's policy. One NU leader argued that what the Rohingya needed was social integration, security and economic well-being, and asked rhetorically whether the ICJ verdict "would solve the underlying problem."<sup>29</sup>

If the key Indonesian goal is the voluntary, safe and dignified repatriation of Rohingya refugees, as called for in FM Marsudi's 4+1 formula, it remains a distant one. Two repatriation efforts through the AHA failed because refugees refused to go back due to security fears. A group from the AHA made a series of visits to Rakhine and Bangladesh, in order to build trust between the Rohingya, Myanmar officials, and the AHA, but tensions in Rakhine state remain high. Indonesia pledged 7.5 billion rupiah (\$537,083) to the AHA through its new Indonesian Agency for International Development, established in October 2019 with a \$212 million endowment.

In sum, the plight of the Rohingya has received significant media coverage and generated sincere bottom up pressure on the government to support the Rohingya out of a sense of Muslim solidarity. There is, however, no single conception of precisely what "support" means. All sides agree that providing humanitarian aid should be part of any strategy, and for some constituencies, the Jokowi administration's high-profile humanitarian efforts are enough. Others want the government to take a harder line and support the ICJ case, among other initiatives. This split has allowed the government to follow its preferred policy of combining humanitarian aid to demonstrate Muslim solidarity while also demonstrating support for an ASEAN partner, without incurring significant public opposition.

## **Indonesian Policy Toward the Uighurs**

China's harsh treatment of its Uighur Muslim minority population has failed to trigger the same outrage among the Indonesian public or strong government response as Myanmar's treatment of the Rohingya. Throughout the Xinjiang region, the Uighur population of 13 million is increasingly subject to gross human rights violations, including arbitrary detention, torture, heightened religious restrictions and increasingly pervasive surveillance of daily life.<sup>30</sup> According to Human Rights Watch, credible estimates put the number of Muslims held in "re-education" camps at one million. China's



“Strike Hard” campaign has also made it illegal for Uighurs to maintain contacts with people in 26 “sensitive countries,” including Indonesia. Given the severity of the abuse and China’s clear attempt to eradicate Islamic traditions, one would expect a strong show of Indonesian support for the Uighurs based on Muslim solidarity. Instead, for reasons related to a lack of media coverage, domestic politics, economic interests, China’s public diplomacy efforts, and links between Uighurs and Indonesian terrorist groups, Indonesia’s response has been muted. The Indonesian government has largely accepted Chinese claims that its crackdown is a legitimate response to separatism and terrorism, and has chosen to privilege the norm of non-interference over that of Muslim solidarity.

The Uighur issue received relatively little public attention in Indonesia until late 2018. The relative ignorance of the Uighur issue compared to the Rohingya issue is evident in an interview President Jokowi gave to the *Financial Times* in March 2019 in which he stated, “I don’t know about Xinjiang but we are concerned with the problem, for example, in Rakhine state — with the Rohingya.” Jokowi continued, “Two years ago I went to Cox’s Bazaar [and saw] more than 1m refugees there in Bangladesh. The conditions were terrible, very bad, and I talked one, two, three times about this when I met Aung San Suu Kyi. We are concerned about it.”<sup>31</sup>

The Uighur issue became politicized domestically only when public revelations about China’s detention of the Uighurs in late 2018 intersected with the Indonesia’s 2019 presidential and parliamentary election campaigns, and this politicization influenced Indonesia’s response. The major civil society groups voicing strong support for the Uighurs were hardline Islamic groups affiliated with Prabowo Subianto, Jokowi’s opponent. In both the 2014 and 2019 election campaigns, Prabowo and his supporters sought to discredit Jokowi by falsely claiming he was of Chinese descent, a communist, and Christian. These allegations were an attempt to mobilize votes by tapping into latent anti-Chinese, anti-communist, and anti-Christian sentiments. In the 2019 campaign, Prabowo also used Jokowi’s desire for Chinese investment in his ambitious infrastructure projects as another tool to paint him as too close to China. When Islamic groups active in the anti-Jokowi 212 Movement announced plans for a December 20, 2018, demonstration in front of the Chinese embassy to show solidarity for the Uighurs, Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi summoned Chinese ambassador Xiao Qian to convey Indonesian concerns about reports of human rights violations against the Uighurs. The ambassador assured the minister that China respected human rights and was only concerned about terrorism and extremism.<sup>32</sup> As the “Action to Defend the Uighurs” demonstrations took place, the Chinese embassy issued a statement justifying its government’s policies in the following terms,

Some Xinjiang residents... had struggled to find jobs because of their poor command of the nation’s official language and lack of skills. This has made them vulnerable to the instigation and coercion of terrorism and extremism. In light of the situation, Xinjiang has established professional vocational training institutions as the platform, providing courses on China’s common language, legal knowledge, vocational skills, along with deradicalization education for citizens influenced by extremist ideas.<sup>33</sup>

China's narrative that its policy toward the Uighurs was a legitimate response to terrorism was given credence in Indonesia by the fact that a few Uighur militants had been captured in Poso with Indonesian terrorists, enabling the Chinese to tap into Indonesian fears of terrorism and separatism.

As the Jokowi administration debated whether China's policy against the Uighurs should be treated as a case of persecution of Muslims or a legitimate response to violent extremism, the dilemma was how to support the Uighurs without offending China or exacerbating campaign politics at home. The Jokowi administration did not want to jeopardize Chinese investment that was important to his economic plans, but this was only one factor influencing Indonesia's response. In the debate over policy, the office of the President was more concerned with the impact on the campaign, while Kemlu focused on broader national interests. According to one member of the President's office,

In fact, it was just [domestic] politics. We did not want to engage in their [the Uighur persecution] narrative it would only empower the Islamist and radicals belonging to the opposition. Our diplomatic problems with China are not because of this. It's because of China's encroachment in the South China Sea and destabilization of Southeast Asian regional security—not the Uighurs.<sup>34</sup>

The response from senior government officials illustrated both a desire to express solidarity with the Uighurs, and a commitment to the principle of non-interference. Vice President Jusuf Kalla stated, "Of course we reject or [want to] prevent any human rights violations. However, we don't want to intervene in the domestic affairs of another country."<sup>35</sup> Given the multiple, competing interests of government officials in Chinese investment, the South China Sea and as well as the country's longstanding commitment to non-interference, the low-key response by government officials is understandable.

The relative silence of Muslim groups such as NU and Muhammadiyah is more puzzling, but can be explained both by domestic political considerations and by Chinese public diplomacy. On the one hand, NU's central place in Jokowi's coalition gave it an interest in disavowing anything that could be construed as support for Islamist rivals in Prabowo's camp. Muhammadiyah was more divided, with some Muhammadiyah groups actively involved in the December 20, 2019, Uighur solidarity demonstrations. A day before the demonstrations, Muhammadiyah issued a carefully worded statement invoking not only Muslim solidarity, but also universal rights and longstanding Indonesian values. First, the statement said that if reports of violence against the Uighurs were true, then China had violated universal human rights guaranteed by the United Nations. Whatever its reasons, "we cannot approve China's use of violence against a weak and innocent people who should be protected."<sup>36</sup> Second, Muhammadiyah appealed to the Chinese government to be open in providing factual information to reduce the reliance on questionable reports, and to cooperate with international organizations to overcome problems about inhumane treatment. Third, Muhammadiyah urged the UN and OIC to convene an emergency meeting to discuss the Uighur issue. Fourth, Muhammadiyah called on the government of Indonesia to take diplomatic steps in keeping with its principle of a "free and active" policy to create world peace and uphold principles of human rights, humanitarianism, and

justice. Fifth, invoking Muslim solidarity and the humanitarian approach it had adopted toward the Rohingya, Muhammadiyah appealed to Indonesians to stand in solidarity with the Uighurs and expressed itself as ready to offer humanitarian and material aid for the Uighurs.<sup>37</sup>

Muhammadiyah's statement and the demonstrations received extensive media attention which triggered a Chinese public diplomacy campaign. Chinese ambassador Xiao Qian visited NU leaders to claim that China was being scapegoated by unnamed countries for its treatment of the Uighurs, a clear reference to Western countries, particularly the U.S. Invoking Sino-American rivalry and attempting to mobilize latent anti-American sentiment in defense of China's position, on December 28, 2019 the Chinese ambassador visited Muhammadiyah headquarters and argued that China was a far better friend to the Muslim world than the West because, "for decades China has supported the Palestinian struggle in the United Nations Security Council. It has never attacked, invaded, or occupied Muslim countries."<sup>38</sup>

China's message was well-received by NU, not only because it was an integral part of Jokowi's coalition as illustrated by Jokowi's selection for Vice President of Ma'ruf Amin, a former Supreme Leader of NU, but also because China has long cultivated NU. China has made donations to NU, sponsored scholarships for students associated with NU, and NU Chairman Said Aqil Siraj has broken the fast on Ramadan with the Chinese ambassador for years.<sup>39</sup> In 2019, NU's Beijing branch published a book of essays by supporters, some of whom had studied in China, which questioned whether Muslims were mistreated in China.<sup>40</sup> Illustrating a disinclination to condemn China and the strength of the non-interference principle, NU Chairman Siraj offered to mediate between China and the Uighurs but claimed NU could not condemn China because the Uighur issue concerned China's internal affairs. "Just like us," he said, "we don't want other countries to interfere with insurgencies in Aceh and Papua."<sup>41</sup>

Muhammadiyah's leaders were more skeptical, with Muhammadiyah Chairman Haedar Nasir requesting that China grant international visitors full access to Xinjiang. In response, China offered guided tours of Xinjiang to senior religious leaders in February 2019 and tours for journalists, academics and social media influencers followed. Indonesian visitors were given tightly controlled tours of camps and lectures on the extremist problem in Xinjiang. China's efforts had a mixed impact. The head of the NU delegation announced that he saw no concentration camps and endorsed China's policy of countering radicalization through vocational training. Similarly, Muhammadiyah Secretary Agung Darto complimented the camp facilities.

Others had more negative views. The International Relations Chairman of the Council of Ulemas (MUI), Muhyiddin Junaidi, claimed that his visit was tightly controlled, the Uighurs he met were afraid to express themselves, and that MUI worried that what was happening in Xinjiang was not deradicalization but "de-Islamisation."<sup>42</sup> Junaidi claimed that Chinese invitations to influential Indonesians were an effort to "brainwash public opinion," and he criticized Indonesians who had become apologists for China.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, one reporter for *Republika*, a newspaper which describes

itself as a publication for the Muslim community, described the “vocational camp” as indistinguishable from a prison.

U.S. efforts to persuade Indonesians to speak out against China’s treatment of the Uighurs appear to have backfired. U.S. diplomats posed critical questions to Indonesians following their tours of Xinjiang, and in August 2019 the U.S. sponsored a Facebook Live discussion on the Uighurs. U.S. diplomats lobbied their Indonesian counterparts to press China to release Uighurs held in camps. In October 2019, Ambassador Donovan met with leaders of both NU and Muhammadiyah to encourage them to “speak out against the repression of the Uighur minority in China.”<sup>44</sup> Such public pressure on NU and Muhammadiyah led both organizations to claim that they are independent and cannot be bought by either side.<sup>45</sup>

In contrast to the Rohingya, once the April 2019 election campaign was over, there was little bottom up pressure on the government to take a strong stance in support of the Uighurs. The most sustained pressure came from the Islamist PKS party, but being in the opposition limited its influence. Indonesian policy therefore has been made largely by the executive branch, which has reverted to its non-interference principal, rather than emphasizing Muslim solidarity. In part, this choice is a function of the wide array of economic, strategic, and political interests Indonesia has with a powerful country like China, which differs significantly from the case of Myanmar. In part, it also reflects the fact that Indonesia has more options for responding to the Rohingya situation to demonstrate Muslim solidarity. The delivery of humanitarian aid, support for the AHA, numerous bilateral meetings with Myanmar officials, and statements in multilateral for a such as ASEAN and the UN enabled the Indonesian government to demonstrate to a domestic audience that it was taking action on behalf of the Rohingya. Such options did not exist in the case of the Uighurs. Whether Indonesia will be able to maintain its current non-interference policy toward the Uighur issue will depend in part on the course of events in Xinjiang and the media coverage it receives in Indonesia, and in part on whether Indonesian actors mount stronger pressure on the government to demonstrate Muslim solidarity with the Uighurs.

## Conclusion

In Indonesia’s democratic era, Islam is playing an increasingly prominent role in Indonesian foreign policy. The Islamic factor manifests itself most prominently in efforts to promote the rights of Muslims persecuted abroad since this is an issue that resonates with important domestic constituencies. Muslim solidarity, however, does not necessarily translate into a high-profile policy of vocal support for the plights of Muslim minorities abroad. Instead, as the Rohingya and Uighur cases illustrate, a commitment to the norm of non-interference poses a significant obstacle to protecting the interests of Muslims abroad. As a country which has confronted a diverse set of separatist, terrorist, and religious sectarian conflicts over the two decades of its democratic era, Indonesia has a keen understanding of the complexity of such conflicts, and a firm belief that outside pressure can exacerbate, rather than

resolve them. This experience leads Indonesia to favor a quiet, low-profile approach of engaging government authorities rather than naming and shaming them since it firmly believes that political change on the ground will only come within. Indonesian foreign policy toward the Rohingya and Uighur issues, therefore, differs significantly from that of the West and many of its fellow Muslim countries. Whether it will have an impact remains to be seen.

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