

The implications of a Ma'ruf Amin vice-presidency in Indonesia

Norshahril Saat



From left to right: Ma'ruf Amin, Joko Widodo, and Ahmad Muhtadi Dimiyathi. Image in the public domain, courtesy Wikimedia. Published and distributed by the Government of Republic of Indonesia.

The Joko Widodo (Jokowi)-Ma'ruf Amin pairing beat their opponents Prabowo Subianto and Sandiaga Uno in the Indonesian presidential election in April this year. Observers were initially surprised by Jokowi's choice for vice-president, who was known to be a conservative and controversial ulama (cleric). Given Ma'ruf's track record of advocating for greater Islamisation, there were expectations that he would use the vice-presidency to pursue unfinished business in the Ulama Council of Indonesia (MUI), of which he was also Chairman. Such business would include the strengthening of the shariah economy and finance, as well as encouraging greater halal consumption and halal tourism.

Ma'ruf is a member of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the largest organisation in Indonesia. Although he started off as a politician, he really made his name as the leader of MUI. In 2000, Ma'ruf headed the Fatwa committee in the MUI, a very influential post in determining religious opinions for the whole of Indonesia. After the toppling of the Gus Dur government in 2001, Ma'ruf became more active in MUI and, as a result, the organisation became a channel for his influence.

Although MUI fatwas are not legally binding, the committee nevertheless issued many controversial fatwas during the Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY) presidency (2004-2014).¹ In 2005, the committee issued a fatwa called 'SIPILIS', a term coined to demonstrate its anti-secularism, anti-liberalism, and anti-pluralism position.² Ma'ruf as committee head signed off on the fatwa. The fatwa described the three labels loosely without explicating their complexities. For example, pluralism was described as the understanding that all religions are equal and no one religion can

claim to be the only correct one. Liberalism was defined as the use of reason to describe the Quran and Sunnah. Secularism was described as the separation of worldly affairs from religious affairs. The fatwa neither offered examples to better govern Indonesia nor did it take a position on an Islamic state. Under Ma'ruf's leadership MUI also reaffirmed its 1980 position on the Ahmadiyah sect not being part of Islam. This position was used by radicals to persecute Ahmadiyah followers. Similarly, MUI issued a fatwa questioning the legitimacy of Shias, and did not correct a fatwa from the East Java chapter of MUI that declared Shias deviant. Again, MUI's problematic claim has allowed groups to harm followers of the sect in what is famously known as the Sampang Shia problem in East Java.³

As MUI leader, Ma'ruf lobbied legislators in the DPR (House of Representatives) to pressure the government to conform to his Islamic agenda. A 2012 interview with Ma'ruf indicated that MUI's role was to give inputs to legislators and the government. He opined that the way Indonesians live and participate as citizens are guided by shariah. He also believed that MUI had a role in advising the constitutional court.⁴ His influence extended beyond MUI. For example, he also served on the Wantimpres, or Advisory Council to President Susilo, stepping down in 2014 and taking up the chairmanship of NU and MUI the year after.

Ma'ruf made decisions that had profound political implications. The most prominent example was his role in the 2016 protests against then-Jakarta Governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok). In a campaign speech, Ahok observed that Muslims should not be deceived by religious leaders who had interpreted verse 51 of Al-Maidah. Ahok eventually lost the

Jakarta gubernatorial elections in 2017 and was jailed for blasphemy. Ma'ruf served as a key witness in the court case testifying that Ahok had indeed committed blasphemy.

What will a Ma'ruf vice-presidency look like for the next five years? Ma'ruf dresses traditionally in a sarong (a piece of cloth wrapped around the waist) and skull cap, but his views on economic, social and cultural issues pivot towards Islamic revivalism. He is a champion of the Islamic economy and finance, and is an advocate for the National Syariah Board in MUI. This institution oversees shariah banking and finance, and advises banks offering Islamic transactions. It is a legal requirement for shariah banks to host advisors from the National Syariah Board. These shariah advisors may decide if bank transactions meet Islamic requirements and whether they contain *riba* (interests), which is forbidden in Islam.⁵

Many MUI leaders, including Ma'ruf, have also called for 'moral' entertainment. They have been actively pressuring the DPR to pass the anti-pornography law. In 2012, MUI expressed displeasure when American pop artist Lady Gaga was scheduled to hold a concert in Jakarta. MUI also lobbied for legislation on halal consumption to be finalised in 2014, towards the end of the SBY administration. There was a tussle between MUI (a quasi-state institution) and the Ministry of Religious Affairs over who had the authority to issue the lucrative halal labels. It was decided that the ministry had authority over licensing while MUI could only perform an advisory role with a panel of experts who determined if products met Islamic guidelines. Lastly, Ma'ruf was also in favour of shariah tourism, not to mention the building of shariah hotels and shariah spas to meet the demands of the conservative middle

class.⁶ According to Ma'ruf, shariah tourism catered for the consumption requirements of Muslims. One could see this as encouraging tour operators to engage MUI's services such as appointing shariah advisors and applying for halal certification, all of which would incur fees to MUI's gain.

While Ma'ruf will probably revisit his Islamisation policies as vice-president, it is unlikely that he will want to transform Indonesia into an Islamic state. Ma'ruf may even ask Jokowi to undertake a more Islamic-inclined foreign policy, with his involvement in objections to the plight of the Palestinians suggesting so. However, any fears that Ma'ruf Amin will change Jokowi's governing style is unfounded given the limited powers of the vice-president. Ma'ruf was once a Wantimpres member under the Susilo government, yet his influence was limited. Ma'ruf's involvement in mass rallies, for example in the Ahok case, was more of him capitalising on such platforms, riding on the unhappiness of a few groups, rather than him being the mobilizer. Where Ma'ruf differs from Jokowi, he will have to defend his ideas before the broad spectrum of Indonesian society. He cannot be too conservative in front of the progressive camp, and those from Muhammadiyah, NU's rival, who also form part of Jokowi's presidential advisors. Early signs are there that Ma'ruf will seek to be conciliatory rather than push his conservative views in public. For example, he recently noted publicly that he regretted his involvement in the Ahok case, citing his duty as head of MUI. Also, in a speech made in Singapore, he downplayed his conservative beliefs and appeased his audiences with the use of populist terms such as Islam Wasattiyah. Whatever agenda Ma'ruf has in mind, he will have to contend with the checks and balances of a diverse Indonesian society.

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Notes

- 1 Majelis Ulama Indonesia. 2015. *Himpunan Fatwa MUI Sejak 1975*. Jakarta: Sekretariat Majelis Ulama Indonesia.
- 2 The acronym was derived from 'syphilis'.
- 3 Ibid. note 1, pp.95-101.
- 4 Dr KH Ma'ruf Amin. 2012. 'Ijtima'akan bahas isu penting kebangsaan dan kenegaraan', *Mimbar Ulama*, Edisi Khusus Ijtima' Ulama, pp.70-72.
- 5 Saat, N. 2018. *The State, Ulama and Islam in Malaysia and Indonesia*. Amsterdam University Press, p.134. This is also based on an interview with Ma'ruf Amin on 3 December 2012.
- 6 From Ma'ruf's opening speech during the 24th anniversary celebration of LPPOM-MUI (Assessment Institute for Foods, Drugs, and Cosmetics Indonesia Council of Ulama), in which he touched on syariah tourism.

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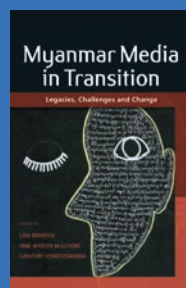
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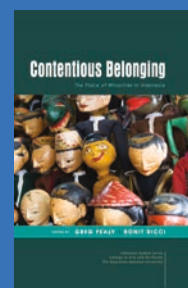
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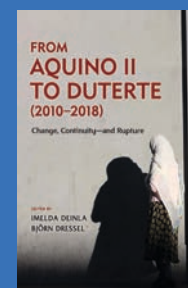
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