

# Fighting Illiberalism with Illiberalism: Islamist Populism and Democratic Deconsolidation in Indonesia

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## ABSTRACT

The global rise of populist campaigns against democratic governments has revived the long-standing scholarly debate on how democracies can best defend themselves against anti-democratic challenges. While some view an aggressive militant democracy approach as the most effective option, others propose accommodation of populist actors and voters. Others again suggest a merging of the two paradigms. This article analyzes how the government of Indonesian President Jokowi has responded to the unprecedented Islamist-populist mobilization in the capital Jakarta in late 2016. Unsystematically mixing elements of all available options, Jokowi's administration pursued a criminalization strategy against populists that violated established legal norms, and launched vaguely targeted but patronage-oriented accommodation policies. As a result, the government's attempt to protect the democratic status quo from populist attacks turned into a threat to democracy itself. Indonesian democracy, I argue, is now in a slow but perceptible process of deconsolidation.

**KEYWORDS:** populism, Indonesia, democracy, Islamism, religious intolerance

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**D**emocracy theorists have long debated how democratic states should best protect themselves against actors seeking their destruction from within. These actors can include openly operating anti-democratic parties, mass movements propagating a different state order, or groups and individuals using grassroots structures and social media to challenge the democratic status quo. In the debate on the most effective strategy to contain them, three broad schools have formed. First, there are the proponents of "militant democracy," who suggest that democracies not only can, but must,

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defend themselves by aggressively seeking the criminalization—and eventual banning—of the organizations that fundamentally reject democratic rule.<sup>1</sup> Second, there are the supporters of the “tolerating the intolerant” paradigm, which argues for accommodation of the radicals, in the expectation that such accommodation will moderate their views.<sup>2</sup> And third, there are the “concentric containment” scholars, who propose that isolation of populist actors must be followed by a systematic engagement with radical-leaning voters and their issues.<sup>3</sup>

The recent rise of populist forces across the world, including in the Asia Pacific, has provided this debate on protecting democracy from non-democratic actors with new relevance.<sup>4</sup> In some Asian countries, populists have already won power, such as Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines. In other cases, incumbent democratic governments are still trying to come up with effective strategies to counter populist challenges. One such case is Indonesia, where populist challenges against the young democratic regime have been launched since 2014. In that year, militant populist Prabowo Subianto, son-in-law of former autocrat Suharto, ran in the presidential elections, promising to return Indonesia to its pre-democratic constitution. He lost to a more moderate populist, Joko Widodo (“Jokowi”), a religio-ideological centrist. However, a militant Islamist-populist movement formed to oppose this centrism, erupting in massive street demonstrations in late 2016. Jokowi’s government has appeared confused over how to contain this Islamist-populist threat. Eclectically—and rather chaotically—experimenting with a mixture of accommodation and criminalization, the government has temporarily disrupted the organizational capacity of Islamist elite networks. In the long term, however, the potential for Islamist mobilization has not been substantively reduced.

This article assesses the extent of the Islamist-populist threat in Indonesia, reviews the government’s response, and discusses the impact both have had on the country’s democratic quality. In situating the 2016 Islamist mobilization in Indonesia as a populist challenge, the discussion below connects the Indonesian case to broader comparative discussions on strategic responses to populism. Based on semi-structured interviews with government officials, polling data, and local media content analysis, the article argues that the government’s arbitrary criminalization of Islamist leaders (as well as of the main political figure targeted by their campaign) has further compounded the damage the populist challenge caused to Indonesia’s democratic fabric.

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, vol. I (London: Routledge, 1966).

<sup>2</sup> Meindert Fennema and Marcel Maussen, “Dealing with Extremists in Public Discussion: Front National and ‘Republican Front’ in France,” *Journal of Political Philosophy* 8, no. 3 (2000): 379–400.

<sup>3</sup> Stefan Rummens and Koen Abts, “Defending Democracy: The Concentric Containment of Political Extremism,” *Political Studies* 58 (2010): 649–665.

<sup>4</sup> Devin T. Stewart and Jeffrey Wasserstrom, “The Global Populist Surge Is More than Just a Western Story—Just Look at Asia,” *The Diplomat*, 10 December 2016.

As a result, the post-1998 democracy, which had already stagnated since the mid-2000s,<sup>5</sup> has now entered a phase of slow but noticeable deconsolidation. In this deconsolidation, the formal architecture of democracy remains in place, but the democratic values underpinning it undergo a process of gradual weakening.<sup>6</sup> In short, while Jokowi's election in 2014 briefly saved Indonesia from an immediate takeover by a hard-line populist, his victory was unable to prevent an Islamist challenge emerging from outside the political institutions. Moreover, his response to this crisis has eroded rather than bolstered the democratic status quo.

In developing its arguments, this article proceeds in three steps. The first section discusses the various schools of thought on defending democracy against anti-democratic populism. The segment shows that even established democracies have struggled to formulate effective strategies, with authors deeply divided over what works and what does not. In the second section, I trace the emergence of the current populist-Islamist movement in Indonesia, which exploded into the open in 2016, but had been preparing its mobilization for years before that. The third segment describes the government's response, showing how the administration tested various models of politico-economic accommodation, but also how it criminalized Islamist leaders with politico-legal instruments that had not been used since the days of Suharto's authoritarian regime. The conclusion considers the dilemma of fighting illiberal groups with illiberalism in both the Indonesian and the comparative context, and extrapolates lessons for other young democracies.

### **Containing Extremists: Militant Democracy, Accommodation, and “Concentric Containment”**

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, democracies have had to defend themselves against two broad types of extremist threats. The first has come in the form of violent, often clandestine operations by individuals or groups launching terrorist attacks on the state, with the aim of destabilizing, destroying, and replacing it. The attackers are mostly ideologically motivated—such as the cells affiliated with the Islamic State—or belong to ethno-separatist movements, such as the Irish Republican Army. Some weak states in Africa or the Middle East have been severely damaged by such terrorism, but older democracies have a good, and improving, record in controlling it. While Islamist terrorist attacks, especially since 2001, have attracted much media attention, they have not substantially threatened the

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<sup>5</sup> Dirk Tomsa, “Indonesian Politics in 2010: The Perils of Stagnation,” *Bulletin of Indonesian Economic Studies* 46, no. 3 (2010): 309–328.

<sup>6</sup> Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk, “The Signs of Deconsolidation,” *Journal of Democracy* 28, no. 1 (2017): 5–16.

existence of established democracies. Indeed, in Western Europe, “the number of fatalities from terrorist attacks between 1970 and 1990 amount to considerably more than those killed between 1990 and 2015.”<sup>7</sup> This is largely due to effective security operations as well as successful political settlements, such as in Northern Ireland. In Indonesia, too, security agencies have managed to contain Islamist terrorism after the Bali bombings of 2002, and political measures such as the 2005 Aceh peace accord have reduced the potency of ethno-nationalist threats.

A much more serious challenge to the functioning of democracies has been the rise of openly operating populist actors. While not counted in the number of fatalities, the damage caused by populists has affected the core of democratic states. According to Levitsky and Loxton,<sup>8</sup> populists proclaim democracy’s rottenness and extol the advantages of strongman leadership. In doing so, they “mobilise mass support via anti-establishment appeals, [...] rise through prominence outside the national party system” and typically profess to establish a direct “linkage to the people.” Feeding off weaknesses inherent in democracies themselves, populists have compounded these defects by invariably appealing to politically, religiously, and ethnically exclusivist sentiments that stand in stark contradiction to notions of democratic openness. Duterte’s election, the Brexit vote in Britain, Donald Trump’s rise in the United States, and the Turkish vote on establishing autocratic presidentialism: all these cases are examples of populists exploiting dissatisfaction with the status quo to advance distinctively illiberal agendas.

In Indonesia, the classification of political Islamism as a form of populism is relatively new, presumably because it lacked—until 2016—a clear leader. As Barr postulated, populism is “a mass movement led by an outsider or maverick seeking to gain or maintain power by using anti-establishment appeals and plebiscitarian linkages.”<sup>9</sup> Whether one uses Barr’s definition or the less leader-focused definition by Levitsky and Loxton cited above, I argue that Indonesia’s Islamist mobilization of 2016 can—and indeed, must—be classified as a case of populism. It clearly constitutes a mass movement, as demonstrated by its unprecedented mobilizational capacity; it has (or had), in Rizieq Shihab, an outsider as leader (which the government recognized by driving him into exile); it openly agitates against the establishment; and it claims to have “plebiscitarian” linkages to the people in that it asserts to speak for the Muslim community, or *umat*, which is conceptualized as a pure manifestation of “the people.” Thus, even before the 2016 mobilization

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<sup>7</sup> Emma Luxton, “Is Terrorism in Europe at a Historical High?” *World Economic Forum*, 24 March 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Steven Levitsky and James Loxton, “Populism and Competitive Authoritarianism in the Andes,” *Democratization* 20, no. 1 (2013): 110.

<sup>9</sup> Robert R. Barr, “Populists, Outsiders and Anti-Establishment Politics,” *Party Politics* 15, no. 1 (2009): 38.

began, Hadiz and Robison spoke of “Islamic populisms” as one stream among “competing populisms”<sup>10</sup> in Indonesia (alongside Prabowo’s ultra-nationalist challenge, for instance). Others followed suit with this classification as the movement accelerated its mobilization in 2016.<sup>11</sup>

But how can democracies mitigate the effects of populist challenges and prevent democratic decline? The first option is that of militant democracy,<sup>12</sup> which stipulates that “repressive measures based on legal, judicial and administrative control which aim to obstruct, criminalise or even outlaw extremist groups are not only allowed but actually required.”<sup>13</sup> The notion of militant democracy emerged as a result of the collapse of many European democracies before World War II. According to militant democracy theorists such as Karl Popper, these states could have prevented their breakdown by using the full extent of state authority to neutralize anti-democratic actors at a stage when that was still possible.<sup>14</sup> Crucially, however, the concept of militant democracy has brought democracy in conflict with its own principles, most notably the freedoms of expression and association. In Germany, which is a strong proponent of the militant democracy approach, courts have wrestled for years with the issue of how to balance the risk of populist damage to democracy against the danger of eroding democratic liberties through bans of populist groups. In 2017, the German Constitutional Court rejected the state’s request to outlaw a small neo-Nazi party, reflecting the importance of rigid legal procedures in deciding such cases.

Indeed, it is only such strict adherence to the rule of law that can make militant democracy an effective paradigm to utilize against anti-democratic populists. Any misuse of legal regulations by incumbent governments—through arbitrary criminalization, for instance—carries the risk of devaluing and damaging the democracy that the strategy was designed to defend. As Accetti and Zuckerman have argued, criminalizing democracy’s “supposed ‘enemies’ may make democracy more prone to authoritarian abuse, rather than less, in the long run.”<sup>15</sup> The only way to prevent such erosion of democracy caused by attempts to defend it is, therefore, to hand the authority of penalizing anti-democratic populists to democracy’s strongest institutions: the independent judiciary. Mueller explains that “the decisions about militancy are [best] removed from day-to-day decision-making by executives

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<sup>10</sup> Vedi R. Hadiz and Richard Robison, “Competing populisms in post-authoritarian Indonesia,” *International Political Science Review* 38, no. 4 (2016): 488–502.

<sup>11</sup> Charlotte Setijadi, “Ahok’s Downfall and the Rise of Islamist Populism in Indonesia,” *ISEAS Perspective* 38 (June 2017).

<sup>12</sup> Markus Thiel, ed., *The ‘Militant Democracy’ Principle in Modern Democracies* (London: Routledge, 2016); Popper, “The Open Society.”

<sup>13</sup> Rummens and Abts, “Defending Democracy,” 650.

<sup>14</sup> Giovanni Capocchia, “Defending Democracy: Reactions to Political Extremism in Inter-War Europe,” *European Journal of Political Science* 39 (2001): 431–460.

<sup>15</sup> Carlo Invernizzi Accetti and Ian Zuckerman, “What’s Wrong with Militant Democracy?” *Political Studies* 65, no. 1: 182.

and legislatures. Giving the monopoly of banning to an institution relatively isolated from political pressures<sup>16</sup> is the most promising strategy to maintain democracy's integrity and fight anti-democratic forces effectively at the same time. In the case of the German neo-Nazi party, for instance, it did not gain from winning its case in court. Instead, it lost votes in the following local elections.

The second school in this debate proposes the accommodation of non-democratic actors. The advocates of this paradigm insist that democratic tolerance must include the intolerant as well, and that the right to freedoms outweighs the need to weaken anti-democratic challengers.<sup>17</sup> For them, "the democratic marketplace of ideas is assumed to be fully free and no conversational constraints or other rules of exclusion are allowed to disrupt the free political organisation and expression of the people."<sup>18</sup> In addition, tolerance theorists believe that democracy's accommodation and institutional engagement of radicals will moderate them over time. Yet in some countries, accommodation has not so much moderated the radicals but radicalized the moderates. For example, the political establishment in the Netherlands, in order to keep Geert Wilders at bay, adopted some of his anti-immigration rhetoric ahead of the 2017 elections. And as this article will show below, the accommodation of Indonesian Islamists by President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono allowed them to develop the organizational capacities that they subsequently used to begin their mass mobilization in 2016.

A third approach, which Rummens and Abts call the "concentric containment of political extremism," puts the primary emphasis on understanding the issues that motivate populist voters.<sup>19</sup> For them, tracking these issues is essential in order to prevent citizens from drifting off to non-democratic alternatives. In a second step, however, elements contained in these issues that are incompatible with democratic values need to be filtered out and excluded from possible government accommodation. While policy makers process those populist concerns that can be addressed within a democratic framework, they should establish what Rummens and Abts call a *cordon sanitaire* around radical populist groups. Hence, they advocate a non-inclusionary and, if necessary, repressive approach towards populist actors, but an inclusivist and accommodative strategy vis-à-vis their voters. While conceptually convincing, in practice this approach runs into significant difficulties if the core of the populist voters' sentiments is centred on issues that are inherently undemocratic, and thus cannot be adopted into

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<sup>16</sup> Jan Werner Mueller, "Militant Democracy," in *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Constitutional Law*, eds. Michel Rosenfeld and Andrés Sajó (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 1266.

<sup>17</sup> Gregory H. Fox and Georg Nolte, "Intolerant Democracies," in *Democratic Governance and International Law*, eds. Gregory H. Fox and Georg Nolte (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 389–436.

<sup>18</sup> Rummens and Abts, "Defending Democracy," 650.

<sup>19</sup> Rummens and Abts, "Defending Democracy."

democratic policy-making processes. This may involve a fundamentally racist rejection of immigrants and other citizens or, as is the case in Indonesia, the religious belief that non-Muslims should have fewer rights than Muslims.

The decision on how to deal with radical populists is therefore an exceedingly complex one, and one in which decision makers face a high risk of failure. The case study of Indonesia shows this in a particularly compelling manner. There, democratic leaders tried—more by accident than by careful planning—to draw from all three approaches. And while these attempts temporarily reduced the mobility of populists, they did not address the long-term sentiments that had propelled religio-ideological radicals to centre stage in the first place. Worse still, some of the instruments used to contain the populist challenge posed in themselves a threat to Indonesia's democratic quality. The next section, consequently, traces the emergence of the Islamist-populist challenge that produced the 2016 mobilization.

### **Indonesia's Islamist Mobilization: 2016 and Before**

It is important to note that the mobilization of Indonesian Islamists did not begin with the mass protests of late 2016.<sup>20</sup> These demonstrations were unprecedented in size and scope, and gave Islamist populism in Indonesia a new dimension. But they constituted the preliminary climax of a long build-up of Islamist groups since the beginning of the Indonesian Republic in 1945. Islamist organizations had thrived during the revolutionary struggle against the Dutch (1945–1949), and in the era of parliamentary democracy (1950–1959). Subsequently, the autocratic Guided Democracy regime, led by founding president Sukarno (1959–1965), established severe restrictions on Islamist actors. Escalating these limitations, the repressive military-backed government of Suharto (1966–1998) tightly controlled Islamist and even mainstream Muslim groups,<sup>21</sup> driving the most radical fringe of the Islamist spectrum into exile. But the onset of democratization in 1998 lifted the restrictions imposed on Islamist organizations to operate publicly. While there were fundamental differences between them, Islamist groups such as the Islamic Defenders Front (Front Pembela Islam, FPI), the Indonesian branch of Hizbut Tahrir (HTI), or Saudi Arabia-supported Salafis all used the new openness of the democratic transition to establish themselves as important actors in the religio-political arena.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Airlangga Pribadi Kusman, "Aksi Bela Islam, Populisme Konservatif dan Kekuasaan Oligarki" [The Action of Defending Islam, conservative populism and oligarchic power], *Maarif* 11, no. 2 (2010): 43–52.

<sup>21</sup> Ahmad Rizky Mardhatillah Umar, "Melacak Akar Radikalisme Islam di Indonesia" [Tracing the roots of Islamic radicalism in Indonesia], *Jurnal Ilmu Sosial dan Ilmu Politik* 14, no. 2 (2010): 169–186.

<sup>22</sup> Noorhaidi Hasan, "Faith and Politics: The Rise of the Laskar Jihad in the Era of Transition in Indonesia," *Indonesia* 73 (2002): 145–170.

Despite their diverse backgrounds, these groups broadly focused on Islamizing the Indonesian state and society. Their anti-establishment agenda, placement outside of and opposition to the existing democratic order and party system, and their promise of an idealized future under Islamic law gave them a joint populist platform. The FPI, for its part, initially developed as a militia of young, under-educated men who attacked “anti-Islamic” entertainment venues.<sup>23</sup> Led by Rizieq Shihab, a Saudi Arabia-trained cleric, the FPI had close relations with the security forces, and was primarily focused on racketeering. By the early 2010s, however, the FPI acquired a more ideologically coherent profile. In the FPI’s belief system, the constitution is subordinate to the Qu’ran, but the unitary Indonesian republic is accepted as a reality.<sup>24</sup> By contrast, the HTI rejects the Indonesian state, and instead propagates the establishment of a caliphate in Indonesia and the Muslim world. The HTI also differed organizationally from the FPI: from the beginning, it grew an elaborate infrastructure, operating mostly on campuses.<sup>25</sup> A similar university-based orientation could also be found in Wahdah Islamiyah, one of the Saudi-inspired Salafi groups. Created in the late 1980s, it “restructured itself into a community organisation in 2002 so as to be able to expand.”<sup>26</sup> Over time, the FPI became the most popular (and populist) of these groups among conservative Muslims, mostly as a result of Rizieq’s prominence. In a 2016 survey, 15.6 percent of Indonesian Muslims supported the FPI’s agenda, by far the highest approval for any Islamist group.<sup>27</sup>

Post-Suharto presidents have approached militant Islamist groups in highly divergent ways. B. J. Habibie (1998–1999), for example, used them to fend off protests from progressive student associations demanding his resignation.<sup>28</sup> His successor Abdurrahman Wahid (1999–2001), while an Islamic cleric himself, was a staunch opponent of Islamist groups, but he was politically too weak to effectively contain them. It was Megawati Sukarnoputri (2001–2004) who for the first time dealt with Islamists by applying a strategy resembling the militant democracy approach. In 2003, Rizieq was imprisoned, for inciting violence. Megawati also managed to isolate Islamist critics of her government’s tough security operations against the perpetrators of the 2002 Bali bombings. Politically, she refused to support initiatives for the Islamization of Indonesian law (for instance, she blocked a religiously

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<sup>23</sup> Ian Wilson, *The Politics of Protection Rackets in Post-New Order Indonesia: Coercive Capital, Authority and Street Politics* (London: Routledge, 2015).

<sup>24</sup> “Habib Rizieq: Ayat Suci di Atas Ayat Konstitusi” [Habib Rizieq: holy verses are above articles of the Constitution], *Suara Islam*, 21 January 2015.

<sup>25</sup> Ken Ward, “Non-violent Extremists? Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 63, no. 2 (2009): 149–164.

<sup>26</sup> Chris J. Chaplin, “Global Salafi Activism and Indonesian Islam,” *New Mandala*, 29 July 2016.

<sup>27</sup> Lembaga Survei Indonesia and Wahid Institute, “Potensi Radikalisme dan Intoleransi Sosial-Keagamaan di Kalangan Muslim Indonesia” [The potential of radicalism and socio-religious intolerance among Indonesian Muslims] (Jakarta: LSI, 2016), 92–93.

<sup>28</sup> Verena Beittinger-Lee, (*Un*) *Civil Society and Political Change in Indonesia: A Contested Arena* (London: Routledge, 2013), 170.



charged anti-pornography bill), and she helped defeat attempts to re-introduce the Jakarta Charter—a clause in the initial 1945 constitution that would have required Muslims to observe Islamic law. While she did not confront the HTI or the Salafi groups (who were not seen as a threat at the time), Megawati's period witnessed a significant decline in Islamist influence on political affairs.

But as in other cases of militant democracy tactics being used against populist threats, Megawati's move against Islamism only limited the militants' room to manoeuvre, not their societal rootedness. This was recognized by Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, a retired military general running for president in 2004. Contrasting himself with Megawati's secular-nationalist profile, he called his Democrat Party (Partai Demokrat, PD) "nationalist-religious," and his speeches were sprinkled with Islamic references. While he did not enter a formal alliance with Islamist groups in the 2004 elections, he quietly accepted their support in the second round, in which he defeated Megawati. This blueprint of unofficial cooperation extended into his presidency. Throughout his term, Yudhoyono accommodated rather than confronted Islamist groups.<sup>29</sup> He pushed legislation supported by Islamists (such as the anti-pornography bill stalled by Megawati); channelled funds and institutional support into the increasingly conservative Indonesian Islamic Scholars Council (Majelis Ulama Indonesia, MUI), which served as the link between radical groups and the state;<sup>30</sup> and took a hands-off approach towards intensifying Islamist attacks on religious minorities. The support by Islamists and conservative Muslims was one factor that helped Yudhoyono to easily secure re-election in 2009, and maintain political stability until the end of his term in 2014.

The end of Yudhoyono's accommodation approach in 2014 was instrumental in creating the context which facilitated the massive Islamist mobilization of late 2016. In the 2014 elections, the pluralist-centrist Jokowi defeated Prabowo, who had been supported by Islamist groups and, although indirectly, Yudhoyono. With Jokowi's election, a new approach to Islamist populism emerged. While Jokowi did not replicate Megawati's militant stance against Islamism, he cut the linkages between the government and Islamist groups. The administration showed itself non-responsive to political demands by Islamists, and instead pursued a more pluralist course. For instance, the government allowed, from 2015, followers of faiths that were not officially recognized by the state to leave the religion category on their ID cards empty;

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<sup>29</sup> Robin Bush, "Religious Politics and Minority Rights under the Yudhoyono Presidency," in *The Yudhoyono Presidency: Indonesia's Decade of Stability and Stagnation*, eds. Edward Aspinall, Marcus Mietzner, and Dirk Tomsa (Singapore: ISEAS, 2015), 239–257.

<sup>30</sup> On MUI as part of the "traditional fundamentalist" stream in Indonesian Islam, see Muhammad Aziz Hakim, "Repositioning Pancasila dalam Pergulatan Ideologi-Ideologi Gerakan di Indonesia pasca-Reformasi [Repositioning Pancasila in the struggle of movement ideologies in post-Reformasi Indonesia]," *Kontemplasi Jurnal Ilmu-Ilmu Ushuluddin* 4, no. 1 (2016): 155.

previously, they had been forced to endorse one of the six state-sanctioned faiths, which in practice meant mostly choosing Islam.<sup>31</sup> Jokowi also reduced or halted casual, off-the-books payments to key Islamic leaders, including from the MUI.<sup>32</sup> Essentially, Jokowi tried to ignore Islamist organizations rather than confronting them, and even mainstream Muslim groups began to complain about a lack of presidential attention. Acknowledged one presidential adviser, “We thought Yudhoyono’s payments to Muslim leaders were inappropriate because often they were made under the table. But apparently they kept MUI, and more radical groups affiliated with it, under control. We should have thought about that more carefully.”<sup>33</sup>

For Islamist groups such as the FPI, therefore, Jokowi was a significant threat to their influence. In a 2014 interview, Rizieq described Jokowi as a “troublemaker” and “bringer of disasters” for the Muslim community, largely because he cooperated with non-Muslims. This, Rizieq said, could be the “Golden Entry Gate for non-Muslims to dominate and control the system.”<sup>34</sup> In the eyes of the FPI, their predicament was aggravated in late 2015, as Jokowi’s approval numbers shot up to 67 percent, from a low of 41 percent at the beginning of his term. Thus, Islamist groups could no longer dismiss Jokowi as a temporary nuisance who was likely to face defeat in the 2019 elections; rather, he seemed to be on the path to easy re-election. At the same time, the popular Chinese-Christian governor of Jakarta, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (or “Ahok”), who was a close Jokowi ally, also appeared certain to triumph in gubernatorial elections scheduled for early 2017. What’s more, rumours circulated that Ahok was considered as a possible running mate for Jokowi in 2019, giving him—in the eyes of Islamists—a shot at becoming president himself in 2024.<sup>35</sup>

Consequently, the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial elections were the natural battleground for Islamists to stop Ahok’s rise and begin to obstruct Jokowi’s re-election. But there were three main problems for the Islamists: first, according to a 2016 opinion survey, “only” 41 percent of Jakartans rejected a non-Muslim as governor,<sup>36</sup> leaving more moderate Muslims and Jakarta’s sizeable community of non-Muslims as a powerful electoral constituency for

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<sup>31</sup> For an Islamist response to this initiative, see “Membolehkan Kolom Agama di KTP Kosong, Pemerintah Jokowi Beri Ruang Bagi Ateisme di Indonesia” [By allowing the religion column on the ID card to be empty, the Jokowi government provides space for atheism], *Kabar Pergerakan*, 25 February 2016.

<sup>32</sup> Interview with a close Jokowi adviser (“Adviser A”), Jakarta, 15 November 2016.

<sup>33</sup> Interview with Adviser A, Jakarta, 15 November 2016.

<sup>34</sup> “Habib Rizieq Syihab: ‘Jokowi Pembawa Masalah dan Pengundang Musibah Bagi Umat Islam!’” [Habib Rizieq Shihab: “Jokowi is a troublemaker and bringer of disasters for the Muslim community!”], *Dunia Muallaf*, November 2014.

<sup>35</sup> “Skenario Besar Menjadikan Ahok Presiden Terancam Gagal Total” [The big scenario to make Ahok president is at risk of total failure], *Bermartabat.com*, 5 December 2016.

<sup>36</sup> “Survei SMRC: Banyak Responden Tak Setuju Pendapat SARA di Pilgub DKI 2017” [SMRC survey: many respondents don’t agree with primordial positions in the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial elections], *Detik*, 22 July 2016.

Ahok. Therefore, simply focusing on Ahok's status as a Chinese Christian was unlikely to be sufficient. Second, the Islamists had to identify mainstream political candidates with whom to form an alliance. And third, a massive mobilization of Islamist groups in Jakarta required significant funds that they would have difficulties raising on their own, despite the expansion of their organizational capacity during the decade of Yudhoyono's presidency.

But the strength of the Islamist challenge was boosted in September 2016, when all three problems for the FPI and its allies resolved themselves. To begin with, Ahok was recorded in late September making a careless remark on a Qu'ranic verse, which the Islamists found easy to package as blasphemous. A foul-mouthed eccentric, Ahok had made similar statements before, but the context of the upcoming Jakarta elections made this particular comment a most welcome gift to his opponents. The MUI quickly issued a fatwa that confirmed that Ahok had committed blasphemy, and a new group sprang up, the National Movement to Defend MUI's Fatwa (Gerakan Nasional Pembela Fatwa MUI, GNPf-MUI), that comprised active and former members of the FPI, the HTI, and Salafi groups (among them Wahdah Islamiyah). Concurrently, Ahok's rivals for the election were announced, and they included Agus Harimurti Yudhoyono, the son of the former president, who still remained popular among Islamists. The second candidate was Anies Baswedan, nominated by Prabowo's party and an Islamic party. Hence, there were two mainstream candidates acceptable to the Islamist constituency, making alliance building possible. And finally, the entry of Yudhoyono's and Prabowo's candidates into the race opened up possibilities for Islamists to have their mobilization partly funded by them and other sponsors.

Amplified by a massive social media campaign, the Islamist attack on Ahok led to the largest mass mobilization on Jakarta's streets since Indonesian independence. On 4 November, approximately 200,000 Islamist protesters demanded that Ahok be arrested. Prior to that, Yudhoyono had expressed his support for the protest, and according to an official in the Jokowi government, "our Center for the Reporting and Analysis of Financial Transactions detected transfers from people close to the Yudhoyono family to field coordinators of the demonstration."<sup>37</sup> The deputy chairman of Prabowo's party, Fadli Zon, was a leading participant of the demonstration, and even members from Muslim parties included in Jokowi's cabinet took part. The protests put pressure on the government to start legal proceedings against Ahok, and it did so shortly after the demonstration. The trial against him started soon afterwards, and continued throughout the election campaign. Another, even larger demonstration on 2 December stepped up the campaign against Ahok, with more than 500,000 people in attendance (other estimates went well beyond one million).<sup>38</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Interview with a Jokowi government official ("Official A"), Jakarta 13 November 2016.

<sup>38</sup> Greg Fealy, "Bigger than Ahok: Explaining the 2 December Mass Rally," *Indonesia at Melbourne*, 7 December 2016.

The highly effective social media propaganda that had preceded the mass mobilization intensified during the protests, and was accompanied by Islamist grassroots activism and the use of mosques to spread the anti-Ahok message. As a result, by February 57 percent of voters believed he was guilty of blasphemy,<sup>39</sup> and 58 percent stated that they did not want a non-Muslim to be governor—up by 17 percent since the start of the mobilization. Unsurprisingly, then, Ahok lost the second round of the elections against Anies Baswedan in April, with 58 percent of voters rejecting him despite a 74 percent approval rating.<sup>40</sup> Evidently, the Islamist mobilization had contributed considerably to making Ahok unelectable not only among conservative, but many moderate Muslim voters too. Ahok only received 32 percent of the Muslim vote, while obtaining 96 percent of the non-Muslim vote. The religious polarization of elections in Indonesia, long believed to be on the decline, had reached new heights.<sup>41</sup>

The 2016 Islamist mobilization in Indonesia shared many of the features associated with the global rise of populism, and it damaged the country's democracy in similar ways. It aggressively politicized religious sentiments after decades of state attempts to make them a socio-political taboo; it positioned its use of social media firmly in a post-truth environment, with Rizieq's daughter posting claims that Ahok's election would open the door to 80 million mainland Chinese to settle in Indonesia;<sup>42</sup> it facilitated formal alliances between militant Islamist groups and mainstream political parties and leaders; and it is likely to serve as a blueprint for further elections, with Islamist social media outlets announcing after the ballot that more leaders would be targeted with an "Ahok treatment" (*di-Ahok-kan*). Accordingly, the Islamist mobilization in itself damaged Indonesian democracy, questioning the political integrity of elections and judiciary institutions. But as the next section shows, the threat to democracy was compounded substantially by the government's response to that very threat.

### **The Government Response: Illiberal Repression and Ill-Targeted Accommodation**

Like any incumbent facing a populist challenge, Jokowi had to choose from the conventional menu of anti-populism strategies. Should he try to suppress

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<sup>39</sup> Indikator Politik Indonesia, "Dinamika Elektoral Jelang Pilkada DKI Jakarta: Temuan Survei 2-8 Februari 2017" [Electoral dynamics around the Jakarta gubernatorial elections: findings of a survey, 2-8 February 2017] (Jakarta: Indikator, 2017), 41.

<sup>40</sup> Marcus Mietzner, "Ahok's Satisfied Non-Voters: An Anatomy," *New Mandala*, 5 May 2017.

<sup>41</sup> Indikator Politik Indonesia, "Exit Poll Pilgub DKI Jakarta Putaran Ke-2: 19 April 2017" [Exit poll for the second round of the Jakarta gubernatorial elections: 19 April 2017] (Jakarta: Indikator, 2017), 19.

<sup>42</sup> "Putri Habib Rizieq Mengungkapkan Strategi China Menguasai Negara" [The daughter of Habib Rizieq reveals China's strategy to control the Indonesian state], <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vCx05EOYwVw>, uploaded by Ya Habibana, 2 May 2017.

the Islamist mobilization by using the repressive tools available to the democratic state? Should he, by contrast, attempt to accommodate the groups threatening his position? Or should he, as Rummets and Abts suggested, combine the two approaches? Jokowi was particularly confused as the Islamist challenge had, in his view, arisen abruptly, and without a clear reason. His approval rating was high, 81 percent of the population believed that the country was moving in the right direction,<sup>43</sup> and he was in firm control of parliament after several opposition parties had switched sides and declared support for him in early 2016. And yet, Islamists were able to mobilize hundreds of thousands of people against him on the streets of the capital. Jokowi's assistants recalled that on 4 November, the day of the first large demonstration, he expressed perplexity about what had occurred and over what to do next.<sup>44</sup>

Jokowi's confusion extended into his government's discussions on how to respond to the populist threat. Different actors in the administration held very divergent views, and the president himself—according to one of his assistants—“did not take a strong coordinating role. Even we were left in the dark about what the overall strategy was.”<sup>45</sup> Eventually, however, some concrete steps were agreed upon. These steps were roughly in line with Rummets' and Abts' suggestion: that is, criminalizing populists while addressing the concerns of their supporters. But as will be demonstrated below, the Jokowi government deviated in important aspects from the key lessons learnt internationally in this regard. This deviation, in turn, made the counter-populist campaign undermine the very democratic fabric it was designed to protect.

Sequentially, Jokowi attempted partial accommodation first before signing off on a process of criminalization against protest leaders. After the 4 November demonstration, Jokowi visited the headquarters of Indonesia's two largest Muslim organizations, the traditionalist Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), and the more modernist Muhammadiyah. Many of the more conservative members of the NU and Muhammadiyah had participated in the demonstration, and he hoped that the leaderships of both groups could be convinced to prevent their supporters from joining future protests. The visit to both groups disappointed him, albeit in different ways. After what he thought was a cordial meeting at NU headquarters, his staff informed him upon his return to the palace that the NU chairman had told reporters Jokowi had not brought any *barokah* (blessing), a widely understood reference to material rewards. According to a close adviser, “he knew then that it was

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<sup>43</sup> SMRC, “Modal Presidensialisme: Evaluasi Publik Nasional atas Kinerja Pemerintahan Jokowi Kwartal Pertama 2016, Update Temuan Survei Nasional: 22–30 Maret 2016” [The assets of presidentialism: evaluation of the nationwide public regarding the performance of the Jokowi government in the first quarter of 2016: 22–30 March 2016] (Jakarta: SMRC, 2016), 11.

<sup>44</sup> Interview with a close Jokowi adviser (“Adviser B”), Jakarta, 10 November 2016.

<sup>45</sup> Interview with a close Jokowi adviser (“Adviser C”), Jakarta, 10 February 2017.

about money as much as about ideology or faith.”<sup>46</sup> In the meeting with Muhammadiyah, on the other hand, Jokowi was criticized by some of its leaders for ignoring the interests of the Muslim community. Following the meeting, the Muhammadiyah board issued a statement that supported the 4 November demonstration and its calls for Ahok’s prosecution.<sup>47</sup>

Frustrated by the material demands from the NU and the Islamist tendencies in some Muhammadiyah circles, the Jokowi government’s initial policy of accommodation was centred on four main approaches. First, the administration wanted to channel more state patronage into mainstream Muslim organizations. Said one adviser, “Jokowi acknowledged the need for this, but he refused reverting to Yudhoyono’s cash hand-outs to leaders. Instead, he wanted more positions for them on state enterprises, and so forth.”<sup>48</sup> Second, the government promised to address the economic divide between the rich and poor—an issue the Islamist protest leaders had increasingly politicized as a gap between “native” Muslims and affluent ethnic Chinese.<sup>49</sup> The core of Jokowi’s anti-inequality push was a planned land reform, which would target lower-class (i.e., mostly Muslim) citizens and thus “take the steam out of the Islamist campaign.”<sup>50</sup> The third element of the early accommodation approach was meeting the immediate demands of the protesters, i.e., prosecuting Ahok. To this end, the palace instructed the police to initiate legal proceedings (in contradiction of the police’s own findings) and take the case to court.<sup>51</sup> Fourth and finally, Jokowi held meetings with political party leaders, including Prabowo, and asked them to keep their members from participating in more rallies.

But the subsequent December demonstration showed that none of these initial accommodation attempts worked. While the government and many observers believed turnout would be smaller than in November, it was several times larger. The NU and Muhammadiyah had only half-heartedly distanced themselves from the protests, and many of its members participated again. The concession of Ahok’s prosecution did nothing to calm the anger of protesters—they still insisted on his immediate arrest. The only part of the accommodation approach that had some limited effect was the negotiation with party leaders; members and leaders of Prabowo’s party, for example, were much less visible in the December demonstration than in the November

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<sup>46</sup> Interview with Adviser B, Jakarta, 12 November 2016.

<sup>47</sup> “Bertemu Jokowi, Begini Sikap PP Muhammadiyah tentang Demo 4 November” [After meeting Jokowi, this is the stance of Muhammadiyah’s central board on the 4 November demonstration], *Pwmu*, 8 November 2016.

<sup>48</sup> Interview with Adviser A, Jakarta, 15 November 2016.

<sup>49</sup> On the spread of anti-Chinese “xenophobia” in the Muslim middle class, see Wasito Raharjo Jati, “Mamaknai Kelas Menengah Muslim Sebagai Agen Perubahan Sosial Politik Indonesia” [Making sense of the Muslim middle class as socio-political change agents in Indonesia], *Al-Tahrir: Jurnal Pemikiran Islam* 16, no. 1 (2016): 148.

<sup>50</sup> Interview with Adviser C, Jakarta, 10 February 2017.

<sup>51</sup> Interview with a Jokowi government official (“Official B”), Jakarta, 15 November 2016.

rally. Nevertheless, Prabowo and other party leaders continued to be quietly supportive of the protests,<sup>52</sup> and individual members of various parties still participated, just without party uniforms and attributes. Irritation over the failure of these accommodation approaches even drove Jokowi into the ultimate expression of accommodation: he spontaneously decided to briefly speak at the December demonstration, hoping that his attendance would reduce the anger among the protesters. But this accommodation came at a price: he had to sit through a Friday prayer by Rizieq in which the FPI leader reiterated his belief that the constitution was subordinate to the Qu'ran.

Its failure to prevent—or at least mitigate the extent of—the December demonstration led the Jokowi government to embrace a coercive approach. This coercive strategy was executed in four, gradually escalating steps, each following the unsuccessful completion of the previous one. The first step—initiated on the night before the December protests—was to bring treason charges against government opponents marginally connected to the protests. These included the wheelchair-bound and estranged sister of former president Megawati; an ageing pop singer; an activist imprisoned under Suharto; and several other semi-prominent individuals with no significant mass following. The treason charges—the first imposed on national political figures since Suharto's fall—focused on discussions among the suspects on possibly guiding the Islamist demonstrators to “occupy” parliament. No detailed master plan was found that would have explained how such an effort could have realistically overthrown the government. Nonetheless, the police formally maintained the treason charges, and one of the suspects was kept in detention until March 2017, when he was temporarily released. The move against peripheral figures was widely interpreted as a deterrent to the key Islamist leaders. These leaders, however, did not moderate their actions.

Hence, the administration proceeded to the second phase of the criminalization project, during which the police suddenly advanced criminal cases against Rizieq and some of his main Islamist associates. Most of the cases were unrelated to the demonstrations, or even to the militant activity of their organizations. Rizieq, for example, was investigated for making an insulting remark about the state ideology, Pancasila; for allegedly helping to spread pornographic images and texts; for illegally using state land for one of his headquarters; and for several other cases. Rizieq was called for interrogations several times in early 2017, disrupting his ability to coordinate further activities. Similarly, FPI Secretary-General Munarman was declared a suspect in a case in which he had supposedly slandered a Balinese militia. GNPf-MUI coordinator Bachtiar Nasir was investigated for money laundering, while the chairman of the Islamic Community Forum (Forum Umat Islam, FUI), the former HTI leader Al-Khaththath, was arrested for treason. Overall,

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<sup>52</sup> “Tambo Prabowo dan Ustad Sambo” [Prabowo's story and Sambo, the religious teacher], *Tempo*, 24 April 2017.

between December 2016 and March 2017, the police—apparently, with Jokowi’s explicit approval<sup>53</sup>—arbitrarily criminalized four of the most prominent protest leaders. The state still refrained, however, from initiating proceedings against their organizations for unconstitutional activism, which is the proper institutional path typically chosen by militant democracies.

In the third step of the criminalization drive, the government took measures that initially appeared to be designed to challenge the unconstitutional platforms of Islamist groups. But once again, the authorities opted for a questionable legal-political mechanism. Cooperating with youth militias under the wings of the NU—the Muslim organization most opposed to radical Islamism—the government began in March 2017 to dissolve FPI and HTI gatherings. Throughout April, NU militias disbanded HTI events in East Java, Central Java, and Makassar, and threatened to do so in West and East Kalimantan. Citing these NU actions, the police then asked the HTI to not continue or to cancel their events. Similarly, the police told the FPI in mid-April not to establish a branch in Semarang, after a nationalist militia had disbanded the founding event. Semarang’s local police chief volunteered that the FPI was “not needed,” but was welcome to establish branches “in another country.”<sup>54</sup> Thus, instead of systematically presenting the reasons for prosecuting FPI and HTI activities that propagated unconstitutional goals (and then referring the matter to the courts for a final decision on a ban), the police relied on alliances with non-state militias to pursue their agenda. Indeed, such alliances are common in autocracies and weak democracies,<sup>55</sup> but are unsuited for democracy’s defence against populism.

To be sure, the first three steps of the government’s criminalization efforts had a noticeable, short-term effect on the ability of the Islamist network to organize. Rizieq felt so intimidated by the criminalization against him that he left Indonesia for Saudi Arabia in May 2017 and remained there at the time of writing. With his departure, the movement lost its most charismatic figurehead, and its leadership split in their negotiations over a suitable replacement. Similarly, Al-Khaththath’s detention contributed to lower turnout in Islamist rallies after March 2017 (he remained in custody until July). At the same time, however, there was no evidence that the criminalization campaign had undermined the Islamists’ overall popularity. For instance, polls indicated no decline in the support for the FPI and Rizieq (50 percent of the Jakarta population “liked” the latter, both prior to and after the release of the pornography allegations in February).<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, the continued

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<sup>53</sup> Interview with Official A, Jakarta, 10 February 2017.

<sup>54</sup> “Ditolak Massa, Pembentukan FPI Semarang Digagalkan Polisi” [Rejected by the masses, the establishment of FPI Semarang was prevented by the police], *Detik.com*, 14 April 2017.

<sup>55</sup> Yelena Biberman, “Self-Defense Militias, Death Squads, and State Outsourcing of Violence in India and Turkey,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, published online 19 July 2016, 1–31.

<sup>56</sup> Data provided by Burhanuddin Muhtadi, executive director of the survey institute Indikator Politik Indonesia.



Islamist influence showed in the landslide victory of the candidate supported by Islamist groups, Anies Baswedan, in the second round of the Jakarta gubernatorial elections in April, at the height of the criminalization wave. As indicated earlier, polls also showed that the number of Jakartans who rejected a non-Muslim governor in principle had constantly increased during the government's campaign against the Islamists. Hence, criminalizing Islamist leaders hamstrung them organizationally, but the narrative of Islamist victimization by the government may actually have helped their cause ideologically and electorally.

Confronted with the Islamist victory in Jakarta, the Jokowi government initiated the fourth step in its criminalization approach: banning a major Islamist group, the HTI. At first, the government indicated that it wanted to follow established legal procedures to ban the HTI, meaning that the ban would have to be decided upon by the courts. This approach is the measure typically taken by Europe's militant democracies against populist threats, with mixed levels of success.<sup>57</sup> But as in its previous steps, the Indonesian government showed much confusion over how to proceed. On 8 May, Jokowi's security minister Wiranto—a former New Order general—announced that the government would “take steps” to ban the HTI. But if it intended to follow existing law—specifically the 2013 law on social organizations—the government had not met some of its crucial conditions for seeking a ban: it had not, for example, issued warning letters or imposed other prior sanctions. Moreover, the chief of the National Intelligence Agency (*Badan Intelijen Negara*, BIN), Budi Gunawan, offered that the government could use “emergency law regulations” to disband the HTI.<sup>58</sup> After much speculation over what this could mean, and after intense discussion within the government, Jokowi issued a government regulation in lieu of law (or “Perppu”) that changed the 2013 law in a way that allowed the executive to ban the HTI (or any other organization) without a judicial process. Shortly afterwards, the government banned the HTI based on this amendment to the 2013 law.

With this, the Jokowi government had violated one of the iron rules that even proponents of the militant democracy approach set for any ban on a potentially anti-democratic organization. As Mueller explained above, decisions on bans of such groups are so momentous that they are best handed to a systematic judicial process, and not to the executive. Thus, after having arbitrarily criminalized Islamist leaders, instead of legally challenging their anti-democratic and unconstitutional positions, the government chose to unilaterally circumvent an already existing judicial process for banning social

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<sup>57</sup> Gur Bligh, “Defending Democracy: A New Understanding of the Party-Banning Phenomenon,” *Vanderbilt Journal of Transnational Law* 46 (2013): 1321–1379.

<sup>58</sup> “Kepala BIN Bicara ‘Clear and Present Danger’ Dalam Pembubaran HTI” [The head of BIN talks about ‘clear and present danger’ in the case of the disbandment of HTI], *Detik.com*, 9 May 2017.

organizations. Arguably, this move did as much damage to Indonesia's democratic fabric as the HTI's activity had done prior to this move. The HTI was not allowed to challenge its ban in the courts, given that its status as an outlawed group meant it no longer had legal standing. Instead, it had to find individuals willing to file lawsuits in its name. And while many Indonesians and mainstream Muslim groups (which had long viewed the HTI as a rival) welcomed the ban, pro-democracy circles were highly critical of the government's approach. Additionally, the ban served to create a sympathy effect for Islamist groups, which immediately declared their solidarity with the HTI and began to absorb the now banned organization's support base. Indeed, after the ban, support for the FPI shot up from 15.6 percent of Muslim Indonesians in 2016 to 24 percent in August 2017.<sup>59</sup>

Parallel to this controversial last step in the criminalization strategy, the Jokowi administration returned to and further developed its accommodation approach. From April onwards, Jokowi's rhetoric on land reform and redistribution took on a distinctly Islamic tone. Where he previously believed that decreasing inequality through land distribution would in itself reduce radicalism, he was now convinced that the program needed to target Muslims specifically—and not only ordinary citizens, but Muslim groups and leaders. To a significant extent, this was a response to the increasing traction that the issue of ethnic Chinese economic dominance found not only among the GNPf-MUI core members, but within the MUI and other more centrist groups as well. Accordingly, the president began to highlight that Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) and organizations would be recipients of the land distribution program. He had first hinted at *pesantren* as beneficiaries in December 2016, but in April, he expanded this to include Muslim organizations (*ormas*). Moreover, he held a number of meetings with Islamic groups, where the idea was aggressively showcased (and well received), such as at the Congress on the Islamic Community's Economy a few days after Ahok's defeat.<sup>60</sup>

However, while Jokowi tried to sharpen the focus of his accommodation policies to target lower-income Muslims and the organizations that represent them, the effectiveness of such policies remains uncertain. Indeed, scholars of populism are divided over the causal linkage between economic grievances and support for populism, including its Islamist manifestations. Some authors assume that deteriorating economic conditions breed populism (Choi, for instance, argued that “absolute poverty was responsible for the rise of

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<sup>59</sup> Lembaga Survei Indonesia, “National Survey on Radicalism, Corruption and Presidential Election” (Jakarta: Lembaga Survei Indonesia, 2016), 49–50.

<sup>60</sup> “Ada 21,7 Juta Ha Hutan Bisa Dibagikan, Presiden Jokowi Minta Masukan Kongres Ekonomi Umat” [President Jokowi asks for input from the Congress of the Islamic Community to distribute 2.4 million hectares of forest land], *Baraneus*, 24 April 2017.

Thaksin's populism" in Thailand).<sup>61</sup> The implication of this is that improving these conditions will help fix the populism problem. But this link has been increasingly questioned, with Hegghammer arguing that Saudi Islamism emerged not only despite, but *because* of a "lack of socio-economic grievances."<sup>62</sup> In Indonesia, too, recent surveys have found no correlation between economic status and support for the kind of intolerant views that drove the Islamist mobilization of 2016. Indeed, in some key categories, affluent Muslims were more receptive to Islamism than their poor counterparts.<sup>63</sup> Thus, while Jokowi's government adopted the inequality theme because it was increasingly raised by his populist rivals, even reducing the income gap may not affect support levels for Islamist groups and leaders.

Overall, then, the Jokowi government's attempt to contain the threat of Islamist populism was marked by a fragmented trial-and-error approach. This fragmentation, in turn, reflected intra-government disunity, genuine confusion, and a lack of strategic thinking. To be fair, most governments struggle to produce coherent defence mechanisms against populism—and even if they do, these mechanisms don't guarantee success. But the Jokowi administration eclectically mixed all approaches, and pursued none of the elements with the necessary consistency. For example, the government chose to defend the existing democratic polity by criminalizing its opponents, but disregarded Mueller's insistence on the need to do so within democratic parameters. As a result, the Islamist mobilization was temporarily constrained, but Indonesia's democratic quality was damaged in the process and the underlying support for Islamism remained unchanged. The effectiveness of the accommodation approach, on the other hand, was limited. Islamist protesters were unimpressed by the legal concessions (Ahok's persecution) or promises of reducing inequality, while those who endorsed the accommodation (moderate Muslim leaders) were not central to the populist mobilization. The following conclusion further analyzes the extent of the damage populists and the campaign against them have done to post-Suharto democratic institutions, and extrapolates lessons from the Indonesian case for other young democracies facing populist challenges.

### **Populism and Democratic Deconsolidation in Indonesia**

Democratic deconsolidation is a process in which democracies gradually lose their quality over time, and which may or may not lead to a full democratic

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<sup>61</sup> Jungug Choi, "Economic Crisis, Poverty, and the Emergence of Populism in Thailand," *Journal of International and Area Studies* 12, no. 1 (2005): 49.

<sup>62</sup> Thomas Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia: Violence and Pan-Islamism since 1979* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 1.

<sup>63</sup> Lembaga Survei Indonesia and Wahid Institute, "Potensi Radikalisme," 209.

reversal.<sup>64</sup> In the last decade, more democracies have slipped into electoral authoritarianism through drawn-out democratic deconsolidation than through a sudden non-democratic takeover (such as a coup or an autocratic victory at the ballot box).<sup>65</sup> This article has argued that Indonesia is currently in the midst of such a democratic deconsolidation process. However, in contrast to many other countries where democratic deconsolidation is driven by strongmen trying to limit electoral and societal competition,<sup>66</sup> Indonesia's democratic crisis was created by both an Islamist-populist challenge and the way the government responded to it.

In assessing the government's reaction, it is crucial to recall the blatantly anti-democratic activism of Islamist populist groups that triggered it. Using mob pressure, Islamist groups intimidated political and judicial institutions into taking legal action against an incumbent governor from a religious minority, despite the police's better judgment (Ahok was eventually sentenced to two years in jail in May 2017). The success of this populist campaign has done long-term harm to the state's politico-legal infrastructure charged with guaranteeing independent judicial processes. Similarly, the Islamists' intervention into electoral procedures—for example, by involving mosques to convince Muslim voters it was a sin to vote for Ahok, despite a ban on places of worship being used for election campaigns—led to a deeply primordial polarization of institutionalized political competition. Furthermore, the 2016 populist mobilization played a significant role in mainstreaming hate speech and organized disinformation on social media, severely tarnishing the civility of the democratic discourse.

But the Jokowi government's response to this anti-democratic challenge has not protected democracy; rather, it has further undermined it. While it is evident that the capacity of the Islamist network was weakened somewhat through the criminalization of its leaders and the banning of one of its core groups, this was achieved by near-autocratic means. With its approach, Jokowi's government tried to combine coercive and accommodative strategies, as suggested by Rummens and Abts, but overlooked crucial qualifications attached to both elements. For one, repressive approaches derived from the militant democracy paradigm *only* work to defend democracy if executed in firm compliance with the law. Accetti and Zuckerman sounded a compelling cautioning note by postulating that non-democratic repression of populists is both ineffective in mitigating long-term sentiments in populist constituencies and risks causing authoritarian

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<sup>64</sup> Other authors have used the term “democratic backsliding” or “de-democratization” to describe the same phenomenon. See Nancy Bermeo, “On Democratic Backsliding,” *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 1 (2016): 5–19.

<sup>65</sup> Arch Puddington, “What's Behind the Decade of Decline?” *Freedom House*, 9 February 2016.

<sup>66</sup> Berk Esen and Sebnem Gumuscu, “Rising Competitive Authoritarianism in Turkey,” *Third World Quarterly* 37, no. 9 (2016): 1581–1606.

tendencies. However, this insight was entirely omitted by the Jokowi government. Indeed, its random criminalization of populists was a model for what Accetti and Zuckerman had warned *against*. In the same vein, the Jokowi government ignored Rummens and Abts' notice that any accommodation policy must filter out anti-democratic demands by populist supporters, and instead focus on those concerns that can be addressed within a democratic framework. Unsurprisingly, then, accommodating the demand for Ahok's prosecution energized rather than deflated the populist campaign, and it concurrently eroded democratic standards.

The Indonesian case also highlights more general problems with the accommodation approach to populist surges. Accommodating core populist concerns, such as Ahok's prosecution, promotes the populist cause rather than overcoming it, and addressing economic grievances, as suggested by Rummens and Abts, might do little to reduce populist pressures in the short to medium term. Another model promoted by pro-accommodation scholars, namely the inclusion-moderation theory, also holds no promise of mitigating Islamist-populist sentiments in Indonesia. The model, which states that religiously militant parties moderate if included in electoral competition,<sup>67</sup> is inapplicable in the Indonesian case because none of the populist protagonists of 2016 wanted such electoral inclusion; some, such as the HTI, not only categorically rejected democracy, but the idea of an Indonesian state as such.

Against this background, the Jokowi administration's best chance of beating the Islamist challenge was, and remains, the vigorous defence of the polity within the politico-legal corridor available to militant democracies. This includes judicial processing of actors fundamentally opposed to the constitution; a systematic public campaign against religious exclusivism in schools, universities, and bureaucracies; and a consistent law enforcement operation against intimidation and violence targeting religious and other minorities. As the experience from other countries has shown, even legal processes that end up *not* banning a radical group help to invigorate democratic procedures and values. Hizbut Tahrir, for example, remains severely constrained in some democratic states that failed to ban it, with Denmark, Australia, and the United Kingdom being key examples. Often, the public scrutiny that comes with the legal process has been more consequential than the procedure itself.<sup>68</sup> Conversely, many Arab states that banned Hizbut Tahrir through undemocratic means continue to struggle controlling it; indeed, they have faced new problems posed by members who subsequently further radicalized and went underground. Terrorism experts

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<sup>67</sup> Jillian Schwedler, *Faith in Moderation: Islamist Parties in Jordan and Yemen* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>68</sup> Adrian Cherney, "Why Australia Shouldn't Ban Islamic Group Hizb ut-Tahrir," *The Conversation*, 10 October 2014.

have already warned that Indonesia's executive ban of the HTI, announced by "tired, old New Order-era holdover" Wiranto, could have the same effect there.<sup>69</sup>

What lessons, then, can democracies—especially newer ones—learn from the Indonesian case? The most important is, as explained in detail above, that any coercive state move against populist radicals *must* be conducted within the avenues of the existing democratic and legal procedures. Manufactured criminalization of populist leaders, as in the Indonesian case, might prevent them temporarily from organizing, but such manoeuvres severely damage democracy, and thus the very collective value the state claims it wants to protect from populist challenges. Worse still, polls have shown that although such criminalization can limit the mobility of populists, it has little effect on their popularity and that of their agenda. The second major insight from the Indonesian example is that political leaders should have low expectations regarding the effectiveness, or even relevance, of accommodation policies. Socio-economic measures aimed at reducing inequality are always good public policy, but they may not reach ideologically hardened supporters of populist ideas. Such core radicals, this article has argued, can only be contained through a consistent defence of democracy by using its own means, and not those borrowed from an illiberal or accommodationist toolbox.

*Australia National University, Canberra, Australia, November, 2017*

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<sup>69</sup> Sidney Jones, "Two Decisions that Leave Indonesia More Polarised than Ever," *The Interpreter*, 10 May 2017.