



The *Front Pembela Islam*: Well-connected Indonesian radicals – a threat or a spent force?

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Indonesia, which boasts the world's largest Muslim population, has been traditionally and almost stereotypically portrayed as an example of a religiously tolerant and pluralistic country, where a moderate, accommodative form of Islam prevails and where other religious groups are able to profess their respective creeds relatively freely. This freedom of confession is embedded in the first pillar of the five-principle state doctrine, *Pancasila*, which forms the foundation of the Indonesian Constitution and generally constitutes the ideological basis of the modern Indonesian nation. However, while religious minorities such as Christians and non-Sunni-Muslims were periodically exposed to discrimination, threats and violence in the era prior to 1998, typically in times of crisis, this problem significantly worsened in the post-authoritarian *Reformasi* era that followed the downfall of the Soeharto regime.

This transformation has faced many serious challenges, but it has also turned Indonesia – following four decades of authoritarian regimes – into one of the most democratic countries, not only in the region but in all of Asia. In spite of these positive developments, however, post-Soeharto Indonesia still bears features of a 'flawed' democracy, one of its major flaws being the lack of protection for religious minorities.

It may be argued that these communities, most notably Christians, Ahmadis and Shi'i Muslims, are not the subject of discrimination by the democratic state per se but have become frequent targets of various 'uncivil'¹ organizations, sometimes also branded as (Islamic) vigilante groups. These entities have gained more freedom to operate as a result of the political liberation associated with the post-1998 era and also because both the Indonesian state administration and security forces have been either unable or unwilling to stop and control them. In other words, Islamic vigilantes and other radical, also mainly Islamist, groups have become a serious threat to many non-Muslim and non-Sunni Muslim communities during the past 15 years. The central argument of this paper is that if they remain uncontrolled and their violent

1 While in general English, the word 'uncivil' is usually understood as 'impolite', 'ill-mannered' or 'rude', in an academic context including this text it carries the meaning of 'aggressive', 'militant' and 'disruptive to the existing social order'. More particularly, in connection to the analyzed groups, it bears the connotation of a citizen or a group, who/which "enjoys political rights while not being restrained by the norms of the civil society" (Whitehead, 1997, as quoted in Beittinger, 2009).

actions continue to be tolerated and sometimes even supported by segments of the security sector, as well as influential political figures, their existence may become a threat at the national level. The main reasons behind such a concern can be identified as follows: firstly, their uncivil activities undermine the nature of Indonesia as a pluralistic, multi-religious and tolerant society; secondly, they frequently resort to violence in pursuit of their goals; and thirdly, some of these radical organizations are seriously attempting to turn Indonesia – so far a non-sectarian democracy – into a conservative Islamic state. Curbing the activities of these violent groups, however, appears to be quite difficult since many of them have quite special relationships with the security forces, which patronize and exploit them for their own purposes and vested interests. In addition, some of these vigilante groups also receive patronage at the regional or provincial administrative levels in exchange for supporting the anti-pluralist policies and campaigns of governors and regents.

This pattern of close ties between the elites and the uncivil pressure groups should not surprise us. It is common knowledge that Indonesia has had a long history of cooperation between the ruling elites and the criminal world. This phenomenon has manifested itself in various forms: from the hiring of thieves as spies (*mata-mata*) by King Amangkurat I (1646–1677), in order to serve as his intelligence agents and police force; to exploiting the controversial robber-bandit *jago* figures by Javanese regents in order to control and spy on the population; to ‘hiring’ the organized gangsters known as *preman*, who were frequently mobilized by Soeharto’s New Order (1966–1998). In sum, it has been generally acknowledged that all these figures or groups have represented important pillars of power in every regime in Java from the classical Javanese kingdoms, to the Netherlands East Indies’ colonial state, to Soeharto’s *Orde Baru*².

In connection with the major political changes that took place after 1998, when the state lost its monopoly on power, the pragmatic patron-client relationships between the state and criminal gangs “have been replaced by a range of shifting contractual arrangements with political parties and members of the ... elite as well as local officials”³. In other words, many members of the underprivileged male urban class, be they street kids, hoodlums or downright thugs, who were previously organized in quasi-official clusters and organizations, no longer serve as the tools of the supreme state but have started to provide services to influential individual patrons.

Other, notably more sophisticated, uncivil groups have emancipated themselves, which they have tended to do mainly by affiliating themselves with a pronounced religious and/or ethnic identity. This shift has proven very beneficial for their cause since such an affiliation has provided them with a greater degree of legitimacy and a new *modus operandi*. It needs to be underlined that their legitimacy often derives, as they shrewdly claim, from the need to ‘protect’ the interests of a particular (ethnic) community⁴ or religion, along with religious morality, which they claim is under threat.

2 Schulte-Nordholt, 1991; Cribb, 1991; Ryter, 1998, 2005; Wilson, 2005.

3 Wilson, 2005.

4 This is primarily the case with the Forum Betawi Rempug (FBR), or the Forum of the Betawi Brother-

This has become the main rationale for their vigilante actions and other controversial operations, for which they were traditionally notorious and which became especially problematic during the rule of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (2004–2014). The problem was that Yudhoyono, unlike the previous presidents Abdurrahman Wahid (1999–2001) and Megawati Soekarnoputri (2001–2004), showed remarkable lenience towards these radical and often militant groups, yielding easily to their requirements, while providing little protection to the aforementioned minorities.

Although the stance of the newly inaugurated president, Joko Widodo (2014–), and his administration towards the activities and general existence of these groups appears to differ from that of his predecessor, these groups continue to pose a grave challenge to the country's democracy, pluralism and human rights. This is a valid conclusion, especially with regard to those groups who base their actions on hardline Islamic ideologies, such as the *Front Pembela Islam* (FPI, Islamic Defenders' Front), the *Front Umat Islam* (FUI, the Islamic Community Front), the *Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia* (HTI) and several other similar movements, who have gained a great degree of influence over Indonesian society during the last ten to fifteen years. While there always has been some opposition to these groupings, it was until recently rather weak, and only in the past few years there have been more intense if not yet too coordinated effort to curb their uncivil activities and impact.

The beginnings

The most notorious, controversial and high-profile group among these 'new vigilante' organizations is undoubtedly the *Front Pembela Islam* (FPI) or the Islamic Defenders' Front. It was officially founded in August 1998 by Habib Mohammad bin Rizieq Syihab⁵ and Misbahul Alam – ostensibly, to protect the Islamic faith and to uphold Islamic ideals in Indonesia.

The most probable version of events, however, is that the FPI was created in the late 1990s, 'with a wink and nod'⁶ from the police, as part of the *Pamswakarsa* militia, which was set up to counter the student demonstrations against the then president, B. J. Habibie,⁷ and to protect Parliament⁸. The FPI then made its first public appearance alongside the *Pamswakarsa*, itself established by General Wiranto, while the setting up of the FPI was an initiative of Gen. Kivlan Zein, a hard-core Soeharto supporter, who kept denying this information but finally acknowledged it during the electoral campaign of 2004⁹. In the early *reformasi* period, from 1999 to 2001, the

hood, which frequently carries out its operations under the banner of protecting the indigenous Betawi people, whose interests are allegedly threatened, e.g. by the influx of illegal immigrants from other parts of Indonesia.

5 Alternatively, his name is spelled Shihab.

6 <https://www.stratfor.com/analysis/indonesia-book-bombs-and-challenged-president>

7 Feillard & Madinier, 2011, p 142.

8 <https://www.stratfor.com/analysis/indonesia-book-bombs-and-challenged-president>

9 Feillard & Madinier, 2011, p 142.

FPI is believed to have had links and most probably received funding from a broader scope of top politicians and high-ranking officials from the security forces, including the then Jakarta police chief, Nugroho Djajusman. This situation, as Kirsten Schulze points out, was probably a reflection of the political and civil-military struggle that took place during the Wahid presidency¹⁰. This relationship was nonetheless far from binding and permanent and may have represented only a tactical alliance on both sides. Be that as it may, the FPI, despite their obvious autonomy, has ever since boasted remarkably friendly ties with the army and the police elites, wherein it has found a number of influential patrons.

In late 1999, upon the defeat of their champion B. J. Habibie, who even lost the support of his home party, *Golkar*, the Islamic Defenders were forced to redefine their goals. They did so by shifting their focus to two issues, the first one being the campaign to re-enact *Piagam Jakarta*, known in English as the Jakarta Charter. The Jakarta Charter was a crucial item on the Islamists' wish-list in 1945, having the aim of making *shari'a* a part of the legal system of Indonesia. Initially, this was agreed to by secular nationalists, but was later removed from the Constitution – to the great frustration of the contemporaneous proponents of Islamist policies. In 2001–2002, in accordance with this new goal, the Islamic Defenders led a campaign which attempted to press Parliament to enact the Charter, which was, however, flatly dismissed by the People's Consultative Assembly. Despite this failure, they often return to the same issue, loudly voicing their request to the government.

Regarding the origins of the FPI, yet another alternative version exists. According to sources such as the *Tajuk* magazine and Zachary Abuza, the FPI was allegedly established as a nation-wide base for the Islamic *Partai Persatuan Pembangunan* (PPP, United Development Party) of *Hamzah Haz*¹¹, in accordance with the model provided by the armed militia *Banser* of the *Nahdlatul Ulama*. Their uniforms, in the form of long white robes and turbans, were stylized in the spirit of the popular imagery of the legendary proselytizers of Islam, the *wali sanga*. It is noteworthy that this pseudo-romantic image, combined with the establishment of 'defense guards', martial training and strongly anti-American rhetoric, became very attractive for numerous representatives of the urban *lumpen-proletariat*. As a result of this, the organization soon boasted around 100,000 members in 22 branches.¹² These numbers are fairly high, but still seem fairly reasonable, in contrast with the occasional exaggerated claims that their nationwide membership numbers are up to seven-million strong¹³, the tendency to exaggerate being typical of similar radical movements.

Be that as it may, upon the FPI's double initial failure – i.e. the rejection of Habi-

10 Schulze, Kirsten (2014), <http://tonyblairfaithfoundation.org/religion-geopolitics/glossary/front-pembela-islam>

11 Hamzah Haz later became vice-president (2001–2004), serving with President Megawati Soekarnoputri (2001–2004), and this move to mobilize for vocal supporters might have been part of this ambitious politician to secure the presidency for himself.

12 *Tajuk* no. 18, October 28th, 1999; Abuza, 2007, p 73.

13 *Bamualim*, 2011, p 211.

bie as presidential candidate and the dismissal of the Jakarta Charter by Parliament – they redefined themselves as a militant anti-vice street movement, and this kind of violent vigilantism soon became the hallmark of their operations.

Before we delve into an analysis of these particular campaigns, a brief look into their basic structure and mission might perhaps provide us with a good platform for understanding the rationale behind their operations. As Ian Wilson explains, one of the FPI's important features is their ideology, based on a relatively clearly defined Islamic mission – i.e. to implement the Qur'anic edict *amar ma'ruf nahi mungkar* (*al'amru bil-ma'ruf wannahyu'anil-mun'kar*). This phrase translates as 'commanding / enjoining good and fighting / preventing evil'.¹⁴ In pursuit of that goal, the FPI is organized into two divisions, each reporting to the central advisory council, which itself reports directly to Habib Muhammad bin Rizieq Syihab, the co-founder and supreme leader of the FPI.

The first division is represented by the *Jemaah* (the Congregation or Community), whose personnel largely comprise 'the learned', i.e. students and religious activists, people with some formal education and a theoretical knowledge of Islam. They usually hail from the lower-middle class¹⁵ and it is they who are responsible for achieving the first task, i. e. *amar ma'ruf*, or enjoining good. Their quest manifests itself in the form of proselytizing activities (*dakwah*), which include motivating their respective communities to attend not only general prayers but above all prayers led by the FPI¹⁶. their other responsibility focuses on the recruitment and provision of guidance and leadership in relation to the organization's second division – the *Laskar Pembela Islam*, or the Islamic Defenders' Militia. Their main task is based on the other principle of the FPI's Islamic mission – *nahi mungkar*, or the prevention of evil.

The main body of the *laskar's* membership consists of street thugs, known as *preman*, and other typical representatives of the mostly *lumpen-proletariat*, i.e. underprivileged young males with low levels of skill and education – and it is a well-known fact that Indonesia has hundreds of thousands of such individuals, whose bleak life situation and limited prospects often lead them into crime and frustration that may in turn result in an interest in radical ideas. In such situations, this may attract a number of such individuals to the mission of preventing evil. While some may (or may not) continue their criminal or semi-criminal ways after joining the rank and file of the FPI, their new affiliation seems to be very psychologically important to many of them for it accords them a new identity and, in particular, a new direction in life, including a sense of usefulness and belonging, irrespective of the nature of some of the activities, which will be discussed below.

As Wilson further points out, given their nature and (lack of) education, *laskar* members, unlike the members of the *jamaah* division, do not usually receive religious instruction and rarely attend prayers or sermons. Instead, their training focuses

14 Wilson, in Fealy & White, 2008, p. 199.

15 Bamualim, 2011, p 211.

16 Ibid.

primarily on martial arts and, as young, able-bodied males whose main potential is, simply put, to build muscle, they are encouraged to develop mainly the physical skills needed to conduct raids, often referred to as *razzias*, on venues which contravene (their view of) Islamic morality norms. During the training, *laskar* members are also brainwashed in the sense that they are led to believe that their actions are aimed at preventing evil and are devoted to God,¹⁷ actually representing the will of God. In the same vein, the leadership of the FPI is perceived by the rank-and-file members as being those who reflect the true teachings of Islam. In spite of this, they receive little to no Islamic education themselves, which reflects their ‘quality’ as defenders of Islam.

While Wilson paints a rather gangster-like picture of the *laskar*, Bamualim claims that many of the FPI foot soldiers may actually be former *preman* (thugs) who have changed and repented (*tobat*) as a result of the motivation they received on joining the organization, even though they are not very observant Muslims. This creates a kind of paradox, for a number of Indonesian radicals from the FPI and other groups, such as the Surakarta Defense of Islam Front (FPIS), may actually be categorized as *abangan* (the less observant or nominal Muslims), and not *santri*, thus representing the more orthodox stratum of Javanese or, in this case originally Betawi, Muslims¹⁸.

Leadership and ideology

It needs to be underlined that the existence of this organization is actually strongly dependent on and revolves around the figure of its supreme leader and co-founder, Riziek Syihab, whose authority, based on his Islamic erudition, personal charisma and partially Hadhrami (Yemeni) origin, is virtually unquestioned among FPI membership. As Bamualim explains, “his promotion to the leadership of the FPI is believed to be largely a result of his status as a *Habib*”¹⁹, since Muslim figures of Arab descent, and especially descendants of the prophet Muhammad, generally enjoy a rather special position and great respect among Indonesian Muslims. However, in addition to his Hadhrami credentials, Rizieq also skilfully used the card of his partial *Betawi* descent to gain support among the autochthonous Jakarta population. Moreover, Rizieq is renowned as an expert in Islamic law, with a degree from the Islamic University of Imam Muhammad ibn Saud, and his erudition in Arabic also adds to his prestige. Although his image outside his circle of followers may be rather opposite in nature, in the eyes of his loyal disciples, Rizieq’s modesty, piety and empathy towards others reaffirm his charismatic leadership²⁰, which actually probably represents one of the most important pillars of the organization. His position has not become diminished even though Rizieq has served two terms in jail, a seven-month sentence in 2003 for inciting violent raids in Jakarta, which was a result of the government’s turn

17 Wilson, in Fealy and White, 2008, pp 201–202.

18 Bamualim, 2011, p 211.

19 Bamualim, 2011, p 209.

20 Ibid.

in policy towards radical Islamism after 9/11 and Bali bombing in October 2002, and the second time a 18-month for preaching religious hatred, in the aftermath of the infamous FPI attack on a peaceful pro-inter-faith rally, in which several dozen of AKKBB²¹ members, including prominent Muslim NGO leaders²², were injured, the issue of which will be discussed below.

Given Rizieq's supreme position within the FPI, his opinions have also been instrumental in forging its ideology and mission. Unlike other radical Islamic groups, such as the *Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia*, the Islamic Defenders do not vehemently pursue the idea of turning Indonesia into an Islamic state (*Negara Islam Indonesia*, NTT) but are rather more keen on implementing shari'a law, which they have been promoting, *inter alia*, by pushing for the return of the Jakarta Charter to the Indonesian constitution. Since this is not on the priority list of the incumbent national policy-makers, the FPI are forced to content themselves with implementing some *shari'a*-based elements at a provincial or regency level. In this respect, they cooperate intensively with regional heads, as will be further elaborated below. In sum, they do not pose a major challenge to the existence of the nation-state as such, but by lobbying for discriminative policies and personally and intensively engaging in the persecution of religious minorities, they do pose a challenge that threatens civil liberties in Indonesia.

Regarding their religious orientation, the FPI describes it as Ahlus Sunnah wal Jamaah (*ahl as-sunnah wa l-jamā'ah*), i.e. the long form of the doctrine of orthodox Sunni Islam. Rizieq Syihab and his disciples, however, strongly differentiate themselves from the interpretations of the largest mainstream Indonesian Islamic organizations, such as the *Muhammadiyah* and the *Nahdlatul Ulama*, and claim to embrace the Salafi understanding of Islam²³. This understanding is based on the idea of a return to the 'true' form of Islam, as practiced by Muhammad, his companions and two subsequent generations of Muslims, the 'pious ancestors', *as-salaf as-saleh*²⁴. Unlike other Salafist groups, the FPI are not particularly strict regarding dress codes and the everyday practice of Islamic orthodoxy. However, as suggested above, one important feature of their identity is their mission to uphold Islamic morality in Indonesia, which they accomplish by conducting the aforementioned *razzias* or *sweeping*. Thus, as Wilson sums up, their Salafism is quite symbolic²⁵, not really being based on deep theological knowledge and a strict adherence to ritual but specifically on the (frequently controversial) public appearances aimed at protecting Muslim communities from un-Islamic vice.

According to their perception, these 'nests of immorality' are represented by venues such as discos, bars, night clubs, massage parlors, and gaming halls, which they typically refer to as *tempat maksiat* (places of vice) and which they regularly raid

21 *Aliansi Kebangsaan untuk Kebebasan Beragama dan Berkeyakinan*, the National Alliance for the Freedom of Religion and Belief.

22 Platzdatsch, in Hui Yew-Foong, 2013, pp 228–229.

23 Wilson, in Fealy & White, 2008, p 200.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

under the banner of religious morality. These vigilante activities of the FPI stereotypically intensify during the time of *Ramadhan*, when these enterprises are supposed to close down. As part of their campaigning they also bully small vendors and owners of typical Indonesian food-stalls, known as *warung*, for selling food in the daytime when Muslims are supposed to be fasting.

The most problematic aspect of these campaigns, known as *razzias*, is their vigilante or ‘frontier justice’ attitude, referred to in Indonesian by the idiom *main hakim sendiri* – ‘to play judge’, which means taking justice into their own hands whenever and wherever the police and state administration fail to do so, and this claim, whether true or false, has also typically served as a frequent justification for such operations.

Nonetheless, while the Islamic morality issue receives high priority status and is thus reflected in the organization’s strict approach towards places deemed un-Islamic, the FPI choice of targets is rather selective, which means that the *Laskar Pembela Islam* only acts after there has been a careful inspection of the target’s connections and its capacity to fight back²⁶. In other words, not every target, which might be deemed as immoral, is selected as a *tempat maksiat* and ends up bullied and attacked. Typically, those which provide the FPI with a hefty pay-off upon receiving a warning are spared. More tellingly, Islamic Defenders have never vented their wrath on the vibrant local pornography industry since it is allegedly run by the military²⁷, one of the most powerful if not the most powerful interest group in Indonesia. Clearly, it is not advisable for the FPI to cross swords with such forces. An additional reason for ignoring this lucrative immoral business is the patron-client pattern of cooperation between this organization and some high-ranking military figures, who provide the Islamic gangsters with patronage, which also implies their usual impunity, despite having a criminal record.

At the same time, in addition to ‘places of vice’, the (pseudo-)moralistic campaigns of this conservative pressure group have lately focused on a range of alternative targets: beauty pageants, such as Miss Indonesia and Miss World, which was forced to relocate to Bali; concerts and performances, the most high-profile being that of Lady Gaga, cancelled due to FPI threats to incite violence; gay events and activities; liberal Muslims²⁸; and also religious groups/sects regarded as being ‘deviant’ (*ajaran sesat*, ‘wayward/deviant teachings’), most notably *Ahmadiyah* and Shi‘ite Muslims, which will be discussed below. The FPI are also involved in the fight against ‘illegal churches’ (*gereja liar*),²⁹ in which activity they find powerful allies among city

26 Wilson, in Fealy & White, 2008, p 202.

27 Wilson, 2008; Pisani, 2014.

28 Another high-profile case was the eviction of a Canadian Uganda-born liberal Muslim writer, Irshad Manji, who is known for her lesbian orientation, and whose public readings were cancelled due to FPI-organized mob actions in Jakarta and the UGM campus in Yogyakarta in 2012. According to the reasoning of the FPI she was promoting homosexuality in Indonesia. Interestingly, the Walisongo Islamic State University in Salatiga took a firm stance and Ms Manji’s lecture took place unhindered. See <http://thejakartaglobe.beritasatu.com/archive/mob-causes-cancellation-of-another-irshad-manji-event/516886/>

29 Wilson, in Fealy & White, 2008.

or district mayors, as was the case in Bogor and elsewhere. Yet another high-profile case was the pressure exerted by the group against the publishing of the Indonesian edition of the glitzy men's entertainment magazine, *Playboy*, owing to its 'un-Islamic content'. This resulted in the relocation of its Jakarta editorial office to the less conservative island of Bali and its editor-in-chief, Andhara Early, being prosecuted for violating indecency laws. He ended up in prison twice, being finally acquitted by the Supreme Court, a decision that was perceived as being a small victory for the freedom of the press in the country. This particular case also reveals the hypocrisy of the Islamic defenders since, on the one hand, they tolerate or ignore the large-scale pornography industry (allegedly one of the largest in the world) – for reasons explained above, while pushing for the closure of a magazine which actually reveals much less bare flesh than the average male entertainment magazine in Indonesia (and it should be noted that *Playboy* Indonesia's editorial office was careful not to select nude images of women), most probably because this particular medium embodies – in their eyes – the West, its liberalism and decadence.

Having studied the campaigns and other activities of the FPI, we might start to conclude that the group's fundamental interest is first and foremost the quest for publicity, since public exposure is the main engine behind their existence. Secondly, their interest lies in a quest for power, which in turn brings them political, economic and social benefits. With many *laskar* being criminal or semi-criminal in nature, the violent and intimidating activities of these types frequently engage in shows of force, attempting to 'stake out their turf' in order to collect 'protection fees'³⁰. Having this reputation as violent racketeers, FPI members are often unsurprisingly referred to as 'gangsters in Muslim robes' (*preman berjubah*)³¹.

This indicates that the FPI have been involved in a wide range of activities, from moralistic, religious, cultural, to political and economic. Arguably, while their extortion racket, which operates under the banner of Islamic morality, represents a nuisance to many entrepreneurs in Indonesia, the gravest danger for Indonesian society lies in their intensely anti-pluralist and anti-minority campaigns, underlined by the patronage of the Indonesian security forces.

This mutual relationship and support poses a grave challenge in relation to Indonesia's stability since this hardline group (along with several others, such as the *Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia* etc.), openly preaches the need for a struggle to end democracy and liberalism in Indonesia³². This undermines the role of the security forces, which should have a primary function of assisting the government in implementing and upholding the principles of the Constitution. However, such a partnership is nothing new since it represents a clear continuation of the New Order pragmatic alliances between 'thugs for hire' and the Soeharto regime. The FPI is exactly the type of or-

30 On the issue of racketeering in Indonesia, see also Wilson (2005, 2015), or Grace Tjandra Leksana (2008) for examples.

31 Upon typing this idiom into a web search engine, it generates a multitude of critical webpages, which reveal the unpopularity of the Islamic Defenders and their campaigns.

32 <http://fpi.or.id/>

ganization whose sophisticated leadership is capable of coldly exploiting *preman* and other violence-prone individuals in order to “serve the political interests of a number of military and civilian personalities who were not ashamed to mobilize in order to receive political patronage and impunity”³³.

Thus, although they are still relatively weak and small in number, “their expansion in one way or another (has) destroyed Indonesia’s reputation for practicing a tolerant and inclusive form of Islam”³⁴. Simultaneously, their gradual rise has also been a sign of the growing weakness of the government, which increasingly yields to the Islamic *preman* groups’ demands to limit and/or disband certain religions or sects, thus failing to protect them.

The problem is that in addition to the FPI’s *razzias* on places regarded as un-Islamic, as described above, the vigilantes’ notorious Islamic ultraconservatism also materializes in the form of brutal religious intolerance, which is directed against several groups – Christians, Shi’ite Muslims and, most notably, Ahmadiyah. In fact, their fight to ban and completely erase Ahmadiyah, a controversial religious sect regarded as apostate from an Islamic point of view, represents something of a hallmark of their activities, which seem to border on an obsessive desire to make this denomination illegal. Ahmadiyah, a stream of Islam originating from the late 19th century in modern-day Pakistan, venerates the founder, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, as the last prophet and today claims to have 200 to 300 thousand worshippers in Indonesia. However, the number is likely to decrease substantially in the years to come as a result of the intense pressure from the FPI and other ultra-conservative groups. Furthermore, their campaigns are supported by a series of challenging edicts, such as those issued by the *Majelis Ulama Indonesia* (the Council of Indonesian Ulama), which have frequently resulted in open and violent attacks on their places of worship and even their homes³⁵.

The reaction of the provincial and regional administrations has not been to ban or at least curb the activities of the FPI, but, ironically, to issue by-laws known as *perda* or *pergub* (*peraturan daerah* or ‘regional bylaws’; *peraturan gubernur*, ‘gubernatorial bylaws’), which have outlawed *Ahmadiyah* in several provinces of Indonesia, namely East Java, West Java and Banten. This sequence of events basically endorses the reasoning behind the actions of the vigilante groups, which have clearly been articulating the following message: ‘If you don’t ban Ahmadiyah, we will keep on launching such attacks’. As a result, such concessions on the part of the regional administrations, which are actually unconstitutional, have only emboldened the militants to conduct similar actions in the future.

The question raised by the ongoing conflict in Indonesia over whether or not Ahmadiyah should be totally banned, limited in relation to their missionary work, or tol-

33 Noorhaidi Hasan, 2003, p 1.

34 Ibid.

35 The most deadly of these attack so far took place in a Banten village called Cikeusik, where a mob of 1,500 people attacked 21 Ahmadiyah members, killing three persons and seriously wounding five others (<http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2011/03/15/indonesia-revoke-provincial-decrees-ban-faith>).

erated and protected from persecution, is why the situation has only recently become so critical; Ahmadiyah followers have lived in the country in relative harmony with other denominations since the 1930s. There have been two official actions targeting the sect throughout Indonesia's history – in 1980, the Council of Indonesian Ulama³⁶ (MUI, *Majelis Ulema Indonesia*) warned, for the first time, that Ahmadiyah was dangerous. In 2005, the same quasi-official panel deemed Ahmadiyah to be heretical and recommended their ban. However, even then, there was no direct action taken by the government, perhaps partially because many influential Muslim intellectuals threw their support behind the case, calling for a dialogue with the sect instead of their persecution³⁷.

2008 was the year which brought particularly bad news for Indonesia's democracy, cultural pluralism and religious tolerance. In October, a highly controversial anti-pornography bill was passed, despite wide opposition from liberal and moderate Muslims, Christians, Balinese Hindus and various cultural groups. The bill imposed a ban on erotic acts and images, broadly defining pornography as “man-made sexual materials in the form of drawings, sketches, illustrations, photographs, text, voice, sound, moving pictures, animation, cartoons, poetry, conversations and gestures”. It also criminalized public performances which could “incite sexual desire”³⁸. Although some of its articles have since been toned down due to opposition voices, the final passing of the bill represented a great victory for conservative and hardline groups.

Similar organizations, most notably the *Front Pembela Islam*, had already celebrated another partial victory earlier that year when the Indonesian government had issued a joint ministerial decree, imposing a ban on the proselytizing activities of the Ahmadiyah sect. There is no doubt that this decree was the direct result of the long-term intensive pressure exerted by ultra-conservative Islamic groups such as the FPI and *Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia* on the government of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. As assessed in the Crisis Group Report, “the decree demonstrates how radical elements, which lack strong political support in Indonesia, have been able to develop contacts in the bureaucracy and use classic civil society advocacy techniques to influence government policy”³⁹. Furthermore, this decree may be regarded as being a by-product of President Yudhoyono's “tender treatment of the Indonesian Ulema council”⁴⁰.

Thus, while being lambasted by the moderate-liberal opposition, who argue that it violates the constitutional guarantee of freedom of religion, for the hardliners, who “want Ahmadiyah either dissolved or forced to declare itself non-Muslim, the decree does not go far enough, is worded ambiguously and does not have the force of law”⁴¹. In addition, for the great majority of the Indonesian population, which, despite a

36 The MUI was founded under Soeharto's New Order in 1980.

37 ‘Muslims in defense of persecuted Ahmadis’, *Asia News*, 2005

38 *New York Times*, October 30th, 2010

39 Crisis Group, 2009.

40 Religious freedom is put at risk, *The Economist*, April 24th, 2008.

41 Ibid.

general trend towards personal Islamic orthodoxy, denounces fundamentalism,“ the decree is an unnecessary and dangerous capitulation to radical demands that are now bound to increase“⁴². Nevertheless, this ‘compromise’, as the government assesses it, in many ways represents a victory for the FPI.

One area of concern is the striking tolerance of the security forces for such activities. Let us illustrate this through reference to a further high-profile case. Several weeks prior to the issuance of the discussed decree, *Front Pembela Islam* members, armed with bamboo sticks and similar weapons, violently attacked members of the National Alliance for the Freedom of Faith and Religion (AKKBB), who were rallying in support of Ahmadiyah. The result was that at least 29 innocent people were injured. The irony is that this peaceful rally was also being staged to commemorate the 63rd anniversary of the *Pancasila* state ideology, which emphasizes the concept of equality. Worse still, the police were standing nearby and simply watching events⁴³. Last but not least, the then president, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, while declaring that such things should not happen in a democratic society, was not willing to point at the culprits and openly mention their names, only branding them as pelaku (perpetrators). Only a few members of the national political elite, including the House of Representatives Speaker Agung Laksono, slammed the government’s stance against the FPI, stating that the police should have promptly detained the perpetrators⁴⁴. However, to provide a more balanced picture, a response from the judiciary did follow and the group did not completely escape from impunity. Probably due to great publicity of the event, the FPI leader was sentenced to and served 18 months in prison for preaching religious hatred.

Nonetheless, studying this issue from a broader perspective, according to the Crisis Group, there are at least four factors responsible for the police and government’s (intentional) inaction:

- intensive lobbying by the hardliners during the previous several years of the bureaucracy for action against Ahmadiyah, particularly on the part of the Ministry for Religious Affairs;
- the search by hardline groups, including the FPI and the *Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia*, for issues that would gain them sympathy and help expand their membership;
- the unprecedented support given by the Yudhoyono administration to institutions such as the MUI and the *Bakorpakem*;
- political maneuvering related to the upcoming national and local elections in 2009⁴⁵.

At this point, we may add two more significant factors: Yudhoyono’s strong em-

42 Ibid.

43 Pamuntjak, 2008, *The Jakarta Post*.

44 <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2008/06/04/government-slammed-inaction-against-fpi.html>

45 Crisis Group, 2009.

phasis on his government's devout religious commitment; and, secondly, his extremely indecisive stance in relation to the operations of the groups concerned.

Fearing further violent conflicts (more specifically, actual attacks), President Yudhoyono chose to pander to them by issuing a restrictive decree on Ahmadiyah, rather than having the extremists arrested for inciting violence and religious hatred⁴⁶. According to the Crisis Group, "another concern was that the government would lose face if, after promising repeatedly to issue the decree, it failed yet again to deliver. The result was a decree which is a setback for both Indonesia's image as a country that can stand up to Islamic radicalism and President Yudhoyono's image as a strong leader"⁴⁷.

In addition to the damage inflicted on the image of both Indonesia and its leader, however, the issuance of the controversial decree has brought about much more serious consequences since it gave the Islamic Defenders and other hardline groups a legitimate excuse to curb Ahmadiyah activities. Ever since, there has been a series of reports of violent FPI assaults on Ahmadiyah, including FPI-incited mobs raiding their places of worship and even killing innocent Ahmadis (see above). In order to cater to the demands of the hardliners, most of these resulted in the above-mentioned regional bylaws, which prohibit *all* activities of the persecuted sect, not just the missionary work, which is the actual subject of the ministerial decree.

As a result, there have been numerous reports of Ahmadis 'voluntarily' denouncing their faith and publicly embracing (orthodox) Islam⁴⁸, whereas many others have decided to leave their homes, hoping to find a more tolerant place to live. While denying any external pressure, the community, as reported by the *The Jakarta Globe*, has simply had enough and is not willing to risk incurring other acts of intolerance⁴⁹.

On the other hand, while the provinces of Banten, West Java and East Java have implemented the controversial bylaw, the then governor of the Special Capital Territory of Jakarta Fauzi Bowo was willing in the end to yield to the lobbying of human rights groups and the demands of moderate Muslims groups, and keep Jakarta open to all faiths. Nevertheless, it is no secret that governor Fauzi, just like many other top political figures, enjoys a rather 'warm relationship' with the FPI leadership. Some of them, such as the then Minister of Religion, Suryadharma Ali, even held friendly meetings with them and promised to take their 'advice' into consideration⁵⁰.

As has been described in detail above, the highly unpopular FPI frequently pursue their goals in a very violent manner, thus clearly breaking the law. Some non-Indonesian media organizations⁵¹, such as the *Straits Times*, have even compared their

46 *The Economist*, April 24th, 2011.

47 *Ibid*.

48 *The Jakarta Globe*, March 20th, 2011.

49 *Ibid*.

50 *The Jakarta Post*, February 16th, 2011.

51 This needs to be underlined since most Indonesian media bodies have not been, until recently, openly critical of the FPI's activities, be it from fear of being attacked or because of a certain bias in favor of Islamic agendas. Nevertheless, in the run-up to the presidency of Joko Widodo from July 2014, and since

gangs to Ernst Rohm's Nazi SA troop bullyboys or 'Stormtroopers', not hesitating to call them Islamofascists⁵². Albeit seemingly somewhat out of place, this comparison is not as flimsy as it might at first seem. Bizarre as it may sound, the FPI and the SA do share quite a few features in common – they are/were very antidemocratic, they are/were been used as power tools to disrupt the peaceful meetings of political opponents (here, religious enemies) and they both use/used significant levels of violence in pursuit of their goals.

In fact, the FPI has a long record of violent actions, including the perpetration of downright criminal acts, which should have resulted in prosecution. However, thanks to their afore-mentioned good relationship with and backing⁵³ from influential members of the police and military⁵⁴ they have traditionally escaped with impunity. That is why it comes as no surprise that there are frequent "accusations of police inaction in the face of FPI violence, and of police and military involvement in the establishment and funding of the group"⁵⁵.

Another issue of concern was the attempt by the then chief of the Indonesian police, Timur Pradopo, along with other high-ranking security officials and politicians, to indicate a readiness to integrate these controversial vigilante groups into the wider national security framework – instead of immediately banning them or, at least, bringing the perpetrators to justice and generally curbing their illegal and antisocial activities. It is a well-known fact that Pradopo actually has a close relationship with the FPI and is reported to have exploited these vigilantes in Jakarta during Ramadhan in order to 'maintain order'⁵⁶. This attempt might be attributed to the above-described Indonesian social pattern of incorporating various criminal and semi-criminal figures into the formal security forces (which is usually done with the aim to curb the criminal activities by such integration, or, also, to gain profit from them) and also to the age-old tradition of community vigilantism⁵⁷. However, in this case, the attempt did not prove successful since the very idea of using and even empowering the FPI and their like for such purposes makes many moderate Indonesian Muslims extremely uncomfortable.

As to the oft-criticized inaction and/or tolerance on the part of the police and political leaders towards violent Islamic groups and, particularly the FPI, this problem can be attributed to yet another, substantial and more widespread reason – neither the security forces nor the elites wish to be perceived as anti-Muslim. While it is easy

he formally took office in October 2014, some sections of the media have become more openly critical.

52 *Straits Times*, April 12th, 2011.

53 See the patron-client principle of mutual cooperation, patronage and protection between the members of the elite and *preman* organization, known as *bekking* (backing), [p. 5 of this paper](#).

54 E.g. the former Jakarta Police chief, Nugroho Jayusman, or the former Soeharto-era general and recent vice-presidential candidate Wiranto.

55 UNHCR, 2009.

56 *Tempo Interaktif*, July 10th, 2010.

57 The most common and basic type of this activity is the so so-called *ronda malam*, or 'night rounds', which are operated by various neighborhoods and communities across the country.

to be critical of the alleged or real criminal activities of these groups, it is fairly difficult to oppose their efforts to uphold Islamic morality since the radical vigilantes claim they fight on behalf of the whole *umma*.

The refusal of some politicians to openly criticize the violence these groups instigate has also had strong political undertones – in the years 2008–2009 this stemmed from the “fear of alienating Muslim voters and political parties in the lead-up to national elections in 2009”⁵⁸. There is also a growing suspicion that some police, while not exactly siding with the Islamic vigilantes, benefit from providing protection to the victims of the Islamist violence, actually resembling the preman racketeers themselves. In other words, the line between the mafia and the security forces often becomes blurred, as has been the case in the past.⁵⁹

Under the SBY administration (2004–2014), there was very little confidence that Indonesian leaders would substantially change their stance and policy, start to protect minorities and take radical action to stop the self-styled, militant ‘defenders of Islam’. It is also true that in addition to the many positive achievements of President Yudhoyono, especially in terms of securing relative political stability and a decade of economic growth, his legacy in relation to human rights, individual liberties and the protection of minorities will not be remembered in a positive light.

The main problem and challenge for those outside the religious mainstream⁶⁰ is that former president, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, during his decade in presidential office established a comprehensive legal infrastructure which is highly discriminatory towards religious minorities⁶¹. Since Ahmadis, Shi’ite Muslims and Christians⁶² have already been exposed to various forms of persecution in everyday life in the educational, professional and administrative sectors, these new legislative elements only serve to multiply existing levels of discrimination. The plight of the minorities is

58 UNHCR, 2009.

59 The etymology of the word *preman* is very interesting and worth explaining for several reasons, including the reason just mentioned. The un-Indonesian sounding name is derived from the Dutch *vrije man*, ‘a free man’, which was an expression for a person working for the Dutch East India Company (VOC), but not its actual employee, rather a kind of freelancer. In the area of Medan and Deli in North Sumatra, this word referred to a bouncer, who was to provide protection to plantation workers, endangered by robbers and bullying managers. These people, however, were far from honest bodyguards, and often rather caused problems instead of solving them. In line with their reputation, in the 20th century, nonetheless, this term came to be applied to young males of free manners, unsettled and without a proper job. Some people claimed, however, that *preman* were not necessarily gangsters and it was allegedly a matter of pride to be regarded as one for it also may have referred to a freed plantation slave. In the 1950s, the word *preman* gained another connotation – ‘a civilian’ or someone ‘off-duty’, in civil clothes. For in the post-independence era a lot of crime was perpetrated by off-duty soldiers and police officers, the word experienced a radical semantic shift – instead of civilians, *preman* came to refer to gangsters and is widely used as such to this day.

60 When referring to the mainstream religious denomination in Indonesia (except for areas such as Bali, Flores, Manado, Papua and several other Christianity-dominated areas), we understand this to be Sunni Islam (as represented, for example, by the mass organizations such as the *Muhammadiyah* and the *Nadhlatul Ulama*).

61 Amnesty International, 2013.

62 Most notably, members of communities in Bekasi and Bogor

further exacerbated by the socio-political environment, one in which uncivil groups are free to operate, being able to exploit the opportunities within national and regional politics, thus enabling them to intensively push for the implementation of such legislation. Consequently, whenever these decrees, laws and bylaws come into force, the hardline Islamic vigilantes are provided with an excellent justification for taking action in their campaigns aimed at the ‘defense’ of ‘proper’ Islam and the defense of the Muslim community against what they see as ‘Christianization’ (*kristianisasi*), ‘deviance’, ‘disbelief’ and ‘blasphemy’.

In this respect, the *Front Pembela Islam* can also be regarded as representing a perfect partner for the *Majelis Ulama Indonesia*, which is also involved in the issuing of such decrees. It also represents a great ally of political leaders, who are willing to articulate anti-pluralist policies, such as the governor of West Java, Ahmed Heryawan, and the former minister of religious affairs, Suryadharma Ali. The partnership between the MUI and the FPI is particularly remarkable since MUI decrees are to serve more or less as recommendations and, therefore, are not legally binding, even though they are presented as such to the Muslim community. Thus, the MUI basically lacks any form of lever to enforce them. Such an instrument is, however, amply provided by the Islamic fervor of the *Front Pembela Islam*, who are rewarded with a justification for their campaigns in the form of the *fatwas* (see, also, Introduction).

The combined result of this pressure and unfavorable policies has been that the Ahmadis and members of other religious minorities have experienced church and mosque closures, or even their destruction, and have been subjected to verbal and violent threats, beatings and lynchings, even deaths. Another problem encountered by the Ahmadis and other minority groups has been the criminalization of victims; many of those who have attempted to defend themselves, their homes or their places of worship, have faced prosecution, which has sometimes resulted in the imposition of sentences that are harsher than those imposed on the perpetrators of (often deadly) violence (Cikeusik, Bekasi etc.). Shi’i Muslims and Ahmadis have also faced blasphemy charges, which have incurred heavy sentences, such as four-year jail terms in the case of Tajul Muluk, a Shi’i leader from East Java⁶³.

The administration’s bias against Ahmadis, as well as its close ties with the FPI, were exposed in a series of events, *inter alia* by the steps taken by the then Minister for Religious Affairs, Suryadharma Ali, who in May 2013 personally witnessed the conversion of twenty Ahmadiyah followers to Sunni Islam in Tasikmalaya, West Java, thus “taking sides and cheerleading religious intolerance”, as *The Jakarta Globe* put it. On this occasion, Suryadharma also allegedly called on other Ahmadis to convert to the ‘right’ teachings⁶⁴. According to representatives of the Ahmadiyah sect and human rights activists alike, such activities on the part of a key minister lead to the incitement of religious hatred. What caused an even more bitter wave of outrage

63 <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/ASA21/018/2014/en/f591886e-3427-4d91-adf4-d21868d611c1/asa210182014en.pdf>

64 <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2013/05/27/ahmadis-depliore-suryadharma-s-stance-over-religious-conversion.html>

among the Ahmadiyah congregation and human rights activists was the fact that this ceremony was ‘supervised’ by the chief of the district branch of the *Front Pembela Islam*, Nurul Rubin⁶⁵. Therefore, it would only be stating the obvious if we claimed that these conversions represented the result of intense FPI lobbying of the regional administration. These events also reveal the rationale underpinning the actions of the regional administrations, which seem to be actually convinced that – instead of providing protection to beleaguered minorities – the best solution in relation to ending their persecution (thus avoiding horizontal communal conflicts, which are not provoked by the non-violent Ahmadis) would be to force them to convert to the mainstream form of Sunni Islam.

These achievements of the FPI appear to be the result of the wide array of strategies they have adopted. As Ian Wilson points out, it was mainly “through its calculated use of low-scale violence and thuggery”, that the FPI was able to magnify its influence, while “being careful not to cross the line into the more extreme kind of violence that is identified with terrorism or that could provoke the government to shut it down”⁶⁶. This statement seems to have high validity since, according to the ICG and other sources, the SBY administration (2004–2014) was apparently convinced that international terrorism had to be stopped by any possible means, including harsh ones, for it was seriously tarnishing Indonesia’s international image and therefore ruining its economy, dependent as it is on tourism⁶⁷. At the same time, there seems to have been a prevalent conviction among some of the top national politicians, in our view an erroneous one, that Islamic radicalism cannot be completely eradicated but its aggressiveness can be redirected towards other targets, which have been defined as ‘expendable’, e.g. domestic minority groups such as the Ahmadiyah and Shi‘i Muslims⁶⁸! These factors may also help to provide at least a partial explanation as to why the Indonesian security forces and judiciary regularly take an exceedingly tolerant stance towards perpetrators of violent attacks against members of the Ahmadiyah sect and the Shi‘ites.

The election of Joko Widodo, affectionately dubbed as Jokowi, to the Indonesian presidency in July 2014, however, signaled a significant shift in relation to many Indonesian policies, including interfaith relations. Having elected him, Indonesia has shown a willingness to maintain its democratic discourse and to embrace the kind of Islam that values pluralism and civil liberties. The fact is that Mr Widodo is well known for being a non-sectarian and moderate Muslim, since throughout his political career he has intensively cooperated with non-Muslims. While in office as the mayor of Surakarta (2005–2012), he allied himself with F. X. Hadi Rudyatmo, a Javanese Catholic, who served under Jokowi as deputy mayor, now himself the incumbent mayor of Surakarta. Another important sparring partner of his, Basuki Tjahaja Pur-

65 <http://thejakartaglobe.beritasatu.com/news/twenty-ahmadis-convert-to-sunni-islam-in-west-java/>

66 Wilson, in Fealy & White, 2008, p 203.

67 For more information on this issue, see Introduction.

68 Jones, in Künkler & Stepan, 2013. At this point, I would like to cordially thank Dr Kevin Fogg of the OXCIS for introducing me to this idea.

nama, well-known by his nickname Ahok, was his running mate for the governorship and vice-governorship of Jakarta. Basuki, unusually for a politician in a relatively high-ranking post in Indonesia, is basically a member of a double minority in Indonesia, being of both Chinese descent and the Protestant faith. Only a few years ago, this would have been unheard of. After fewer than two years in the governor's office, during which time Jokowi, with Basuki as his deputy, achieved many improvements in terms of the city administration, infrastructure and welfare, Jokowi decided to run for president, leaving Basuki in charge of Jakarta. Basuki became acting governor and, in November 2014, the fully-fledged governor of the national capital, becoming the first Chinese Indonesian and second-only Christian assuming this office. This elevation was greeted by great dismay and frustration on the part of Islamic radicals such as the FPI and other anti-establishment groups such as the FBR.

It is also worth noting at this point that, quite unsurprisingly, the FPI, the FBR, the *Pemuda Pancasila* and other organizations categorized as *ormas*⁶⁹, rallied loudly and strongly in support of Jokowi's rival for the presidency, Prabowo Subianto⁷⁰, a former Soeharto-era general who was renowned for his negative record on human rights. In support of their cause, these groupings united in the so-called *Forum Ormas Bersatu* (the United Forum of Social Organizations). Obviously, in addition to voicing their rather crude nationalist sentiments, typical of populist politicians such as Prabowo, this alliance (between the political and the vigilante groups) was actually a perfect match in terms of the above-explained pattern of client-patron cooperation that exists between the elite and the criminal/uncivil groups. If we can resort to speculation here, we might come to the conclusion that if Prabowo had won the election and become president, these groups would have had an even a wider space in which to operate and would probably have been used extensively – as bully boys – to intimidate those in opposition to the new president. In other words, some typical features of the old Soeharto era would have been re-energized and the democratic discourse would have been severely challenged. Jokowi's victory, therefore, must have been a very unwelcome outcome to this faction, and, by the same token, it was lauded by their opponents as providing an opportunity for advancing the continuation of the unfinished democratic transformation process.

Joko Widodo is, therefore, under close surveillance regarding potential changes in a legislature that is currently unsupportive of religious minorities, a legacy of the 10-year rule of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (2004–2014). Decisions that he and his administration make will be carefully scrutinized.

In the meantime, the new governor of Jakarta, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, had been facing opposition from various parties, including the *Front Pembela Islam*. In December 2014, in an attempt to humiliate Basuki, the FPI 'installed' their 'counter governor', Fahrurrozi Ishaq⁷¹, denouncing the legitimate governor as a *kafir* and a

69 *Ormas*, or *organisasi masyarakat*, literally 'social organization'.

70 <http://www.tribunnews.com/pemilu-2014/2014/05/31/fpi-fbr-dan-pemuda-pancasila-deklarasi-dukung-prabowo-hatta>

71 <http://metro.tempo.co/read/news/2014/12/01/231625676/fpi-pilih-gubernur-jakarta-fahrurrozi-siapa-dia>

non-Muslim in charge of a Muslim community. However, having gained neither large-scale support among Jakarta's Muslim population, nor any form of legal support, Fahrurrozi, well-known for not being too sophisticated, became a laughing stock on Indonesian social networks and internet-based media. Governor 'Ahok' continues to work hard in favor of Jakarta's development, thus gaining the popular support of many Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

While the FPI might enjoy a degree of tolerance, approval and even support from segments of the police, the army and a number of biased media organizations, they face growing opposition from civil society, NGOs and other media agencies. The reasons are multiple and, one is inclined to say, natural: a) the violence to which they often resort; b) their intolerance and hate-preaching, seen as being in contradiction of *Pancasila* (the principles of which, more than ever, appear to be being promoted as precious and valued in modern-day Indonesia); c) their tendency to 'play judge'; d) and generally, their gangster-like character and behavior.

At the moment, it is difficult to ascertain whether this has to do with the growing courage and awareness of members of Indonesian civil society, which is no longer content to play the 'silent majority', tacitly accepting such behavior and frequently finding itself the focus of criticism from some domestic commentators, as well as foreign observers. Nonetheless, it is clear that for many strands of the traditionally pluralist Indonesian society, the activities of the FPI (and other similar uncivil groups) have become excessive and are no longer acceptable. In spite of certain Islamizing trends, described for example in the introduction, there is a greater degree of awareness of the afore-mentioned threats. In addition, many orthodox Muslims can clearly see for themselves that FPI members do not behave in accordance with Islamic tenets, and so, despite growing levels of Islamic orthodoxy and personal piety, these *preman berjubah* ('gangsters in Islamic robes'), are gradually becoming disrespected and dismissed as an uncivil group. They are increasingly seen as being those who besmirch the good name of Islam and ignore the principles of religious moderation, which are seen as being appropriate and proper for Indonesia. In other words, while some segments of society would like to live in a more pious Muslim environment, they are nonetheless concerned about the violent actions of the FPI and similar uncivil groups. On the other hand, others, especially the traditional leaders and supporters of the Nahdlatul Ulama, intensely promote pluralism, inclusiveness and non-fundamentalism.

Thus, while the occurrence of media reports of FPI attacks has not drastically decreased, the frequency of criticism, actions against the FPI, and even open clashes between civil society groups and the FPI in the Indonesian media is growing. The most notable case of opposition being directed against the Islamic Defenders' Front was the action of the Dayak civil rights group in Palangkaraya, Central Kalimantan, in February 2012 when several hundred Dayak protesters prevented four representatives of the FPI from disembarking from the plane in order to establish the movement's branch office in the province. The reasoning behind this bold action was that Central Kalimantan is a region "conducive for religious harmony and co-

existence” and “there was no need for FPI” presence or even a branch in the area⁷².

Only a few days later, a similar demonstration was staged in Jakarta, with several hundred attendees, with the motif being similar to Dayak tribal policy: “If the Dayaks (in Palangkaraya) can do it, why can’t we? People in Jakarta are often the victims of the FPI’s violent acts,” said Vivi Widyawati, the coordinator of the Movement for an FPI-free Indonesia⁷³.

According to many sources, including some pro-democracy media such as the Indonesian web-based daily, *Tribun News*, ever since 2012, “the wish to disband the social organization Front Pembela Islam has roared in many places. Anarchic actions which often include FPI have become the reason for the proposal of their disbandment”.⁷⁴ The main opponent of their elimination, or at least the curbing of their activities, seems to be the mainstream traditionalist organization *Nahdlatul Ulama*, a regular proponent of a more inclusive and moderate form of Islam, ideally reflecting the ‘Indonesian character’ – *Islam Nusantara*. NU-based youth wings and their task forces have been most vocal in this respect, especially the *Gerakan Pemuda Ansor Sulut* (North Sulawesi Youth Movement of Ansor), which reacted strongly to the inaction of the then president, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, in relation to the case of the Protestant church *Gereja GKI Yasmin Bogor*⁷⁵, which was closed down by the local municipal authorities due to pressure from the local FPI, who rejected the call to re-open it, even after a ruling had been passed by an independent court.

Despite these developments in favor of curbing the activities and influence of the Front Pembela Islam, a more robust campaign on the part of the incumbent government is still awaited. The Religious Affairs minister, Lukman Hakim Saifuddin, a man who has been praised for his progressive stance on many issues, especially religious minority rights⁷⁶, still faces a huge task in terms of convincing many of his counterparts, as well as the chiefs of the security forces, to promote religious pluralism, while simultaneously curbing all violent actions of uncivil vigilante groups and upholding the protection of those outside the religious mainstream. Although the influence of political Islamism in Indonesia has recently decreased considerably in favor of the socio-cultural Islamic arena, the task ahead will still be enormously difficult, given a broad scope of factors, including growing levels of religious conservatism and the generally, the increasing centrality of Islam in the Indonesian public sphere, as well as the lasting patron-client ties between the vigilantes and members of the ruling elite, who exploit the militancy of the former in order to protect their own vested interests, thus further empowering them.

72 <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2012/02/11/senior-fpi-officials-booted-out-palangkaraya.html>

73 <http://www.ucaNews.com/news/check-opposition-to-hardliners-grows/42598>

74 <http://www.tribunnews.com/regional/2012/02/19/ansor-sulawesi-utara-dukung-pembubaran-fpi>

75 Ibid.

76 While deservedly praised for abovementioned steps, Saifuddin’s positive role as a protector of religious pluralism in Indonesia should not be overestimated since in a recent controversial issue regarding inter-faith marriages he strongly approved of the ruling of the Constitutional Court which had rejected mixed marriages (<http://www.antaraneWS.com/en/news/99290/indonesian-minister-lauds-courts-decision-over-interfaith-marriage>), which pro-pluralis groups saw as yielding to conservatives.

While there is reason for cautious optimism regarding the upholding of religious pluralism following the bleak years for minorities above all during the Yudhoyono era, it appears that only a full-frontal campaign on the part of senior politicians, influential moderate *ulama* and their organizations will suffice. Their efforts will require the support of intense grass-root level NGO activities and adequate publicity for these issues, which may bring about a more substantial change in relation to the situation of beleaguered minorities *vis-à-vis* the uncivil vigilante groups such as the *Front Pembela Islam* as well as unfavorable legislation. Furthermore, persistent widespread poverty and bleak career prospects experienced by hundreds of thousands of underprivileged young urban males will probably further provide a large recruitment pool for radical organizations, who seek to offer a new direction in life, as well as a source of livelihood. Last but not least, the degree of influence that the FPI and similar radical groups exert over Indonesian society, given the age-old tradition of close relationships between those in power and ‘thugs for hire’, is dependent on whether particular Indonesian elites still find the operations of these groupings beneficial in relation to their vested interests, or whether they decide, at last, that their existence is unacceptable in a democratically evolving society.

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