As the growing backlash against globalization picks up pace, populists and nationalists are on the march, particularly in the US and Europe. Leaders in Asia can hardly escape this growing trend, even as they grapple with their own emerging domestic challenges and the evolving transformation in the regional order. We profile some of Asia’s key leaders and the mark they are making.

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Turning to Religion: Indonesia’s Widodo Plays the Islamic Card

By John McBeth

Joko Widodo, Indonesia’s affable common-man president, came to office in 2014 amid high expectations that he would introduce a new political era in the country — populist, capable and committed to getting things done. But the increasing influence of Islamist issues in national and local politics has pushed him to accommodate, in some form or another, views held by conservative Islamic parties ahead of next year’s elections. John McBeth explores the complex landscape Widodo must navigate in his quest for a second term.

BACK IN LATE 2009, a former military colleague of Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono was asked whether Indonesia would see the emergence of a new and more dynamic leader now that Yudhoyono was entering a second and mandated final term with nothing to lose and the economy riding the crest of an historic commodity boom. Retired Lieutenant-General Agus Wijoyo, currently head of Indonesia’s National Defence Institute, paused for a moment and then rather mournfully shook his head. Caution to the core, he explained, it just wasn’t in the president’s DNA to change the way he did business, much of which involved sitting on the fence. How right he turned out to be.

Fast forward a decade to Joko Widodo, 57, the country’s first common-man president and the favorite to win a second term himself in the legislative and presidential elections to be held on April 27, 2019. This time, the question is harder to answer, but has even greater relevance than ever.

The malleable Yudhoyono was not known to be devoutly religious, but during his decade in power the fundamentalist Muslim revival that began with the downfall of long-serving President Suharto in May 1998 took a disturbing turn and led to the world’s biggest Muslim-majority democracy losing much of its well-earned reputation for tolerance under a gathering wave of Islamic orthodoxy.

THE SPECTER OF AHOK

Perhaps the biggest blow to home-bred sectarianism, however, has come during Widodo’s first term, in 2017, when a hardline Islamic coalition used a tenuous blasphemy charge to defeat and jail the president’s close ally, the ethnic-Chinese Christian governor of Jakarta, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, known as Ahok, and raise unfounded charges that the president himself was un-Islamic.

One of the key instigators behind these developments, which brought down perhaps the most effective municipal leader Jakarta had ever seen, was conservative Muslim cleric Ma’ruf Amin, 75, who to the surprise and dismay of secularists and ethnic and social minorities alike is now Widodo’s choice as his 2019 running mate. It potentially leaves Amin a proverbial heartbeat away from the presidency and in a position to influence policies that could dramatically transform the character of Indonesian society.

The late pluralistic President Abdurrahman Wahid may have been the first cleric to head Indonesia’s executive branch, but he was a far cry from Amin, the long-serving chairman of the Indonesia Ulama Council (MUI) and president of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Indonesia’s largest Muslim organization, which Wahid once headed and which is under the growing influence of doctrinaire forces.

While the near-blind, often-erratic Wahid may have failed as the country’s third president, his legitimacy and that of his successor, Megawati Sukarnoputri, daughter of founding President Sukarno, stemmed from their leadership of the political opposition against authoritarian ruler Suharto, whose downfall in 1998 spawned the birth of Indonesia’s democratic era.

Despite claims that the decision was forced on him by the NU-affiliated United Development Party (PPP) and National Awakening Party (PKB), two of the six parliamentary partners in the current ruling coalition, Widodo has chosen Amin for one reason and one reason only — to split the conservative Muslim vote, which has clearly haunted the president since the Purnama debacle.

What worries many Indonesian pluralists is that this precedent will be repeated in the future by would-be presidents who may feel that their religious credentials — in a sprawling archipelago of 228 million Muslims — are more important to getting elected than anything else.

After all, Purnama would have won reelection handily, perhaps even by a landslide, if he had been judged on his capabilities in a job he had made his own through strength of will. In the end, otherwise well-satisfied Muslim voters were too-easily persuaded that his error of judgement over the interpretation of a verse in the Koran was more important.

Widodo’s first choice was Mohammad Mahfud Mahmodin, generally known as Mahfud MD, 61, the ex-chief justice of the Constitutional Court and a former defense and justice minister in the Wahid administration. But he changed his mind in the final hours before the Aug. 10 nomination deadline, stunning many with the graphic demonstration that he could not make his own choice after four years in office.

Both the PPP and the PKB had threatened to leave the coalition. Then Amin added his voice, warning the president that if he continued with Mahfud, he would lose the support of NU and its claimed 45 million members. The second-ranked Golkar Party also opposed Mahfud, mindful of his role in seeking the disbandment of Suharto’s political machine in the early days of reformasi when he served as defense and later justice minister in the embattled Wahid’s government.

Golkar Chairman and Industry Minister Airlangga Hartarto, the son of a respected Suharto-era economic minister, had also been on Widodo’s shortlist, but he was dropped from contention after the president decided not to choose anyone from among his six parliamentary coalition partners because of fears it would cause internal conflicts.
Golkar remains a valuable if somewhat disgruntled ally, puzzled like everyone else about why Widodo suddenly developed cold feet when he continues to enjoy a comfortable lead in the polls over his hard-charging presidential rival, retired general and Great Indonesia Movement Party (Gerindra) leader Prabowo Subianto, whom he defeated in 2014.

A poll by the Indonesian Survey Institute (LSI) taken after the nominations were announced had Widodo at 52.2 percent, far ahead of Prabowo at 29.5 percent, with 18.3 percent undecided. Without Amin as his running mate, the president actually polled 1.4 percent higher, but not enough to draw any firm conclusions. Among non-Muslim voters, however, support for Widodo plunged from 70.3 percent to 51.5 percent.

WHO IS THE REAL MA’RUF AMIN?
The president had sought to co-opt Amin after the 2016 mass demonstrations that led to Purnama’s defeat, bringing him in as an adviser as part of efforts to curry favor with Muslim conservatives. The cleric responded by declaring his support for the Pancasila state ideology and NU’s Islam Nusantara philosophy, both of which promote pluralism and inclusiveness. But analysts found it difficult to equate this with Amin’s past record as the architect of 2005 MUI edicts against secularism, pluralism and liberalism that undermined tolerance, and also an inflammatory 2008 fatwa outlawing the teachings of the Muslim sect Ahmadiyah that encouraged bloody mob attacks against the tiny minority.

But what galled most pluralists was his involvement with a potent coalition of hard-line groups, supported by Prabowo and other anti-Widodo politicians and gathered under the umbrella of the 212 Movement, named after a massive rally on Dec. 2, 2016, that brought a million people onto Jakarta’s streets. Afterward, Amin appeared as an expert witness at Purnama’s controversial blasphemy trial, where the outgoing governor was convicted and sentenced to three years’ imprisonment, a term that ends just after the 2019 elections.

MORE SUDDEN SWITCHES
If Widodo introduced an eleventh-hour surprise, so did Prabowo. After forming a much-publicized alliance with Yudhoyono’s Democrat Party in late July, he then unceremoniously ditched the former president’s son, Agus Harimurti, 39, as a running mate in favor of deputy Jakarta governor Sandiaga Uno, 49, a wealthy businessman he once considered too soft for the rough and tumble of high-level politics.

Again, there is evidence to suggest he was swayed by his two other opposition partners, the Sharia-based Justice and Prosperity Party (PKS) and the National Mandate Party (PAN), both of which can be relied on to play the Islamic card against the incumbent in the upcoming presidential campaign.

Prabowo, a Muslim from a family of Christians, has not been shy in consorting with Islamic groups when it suits him. He sought their support in his power struggle with armed forces chief Wiranto in the dying days of Suharto’s New Order regime, and in his unsuccessful, but spirited bid for the presidency in 2014, when PKS, PPP and PAN were all allies.

He also had no hesitation in resorting to primordial tactics in the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election, where he backed the ultimately victorious Anies Baswedan, a former education minister. But on the wider national stage, he now realizes there is more to be gained by attacking Widodo on economic issues, particularly with the growth rate stuck at 5 percent, and the president’s reliance on China for infrastructure funding.

Prabowo’s reported change of tactics apparently prompted Widodo to remove Finance minister Sri Mulyani Indrawati from his electoral success team so she can concentrate on managing the state budget and dealing with other related issues. Analysts say the economy will require careful attention in the eight-month lead-up to the national elections, particularly in keeping food prices in check.

The president now runs the risk of alienating pluralists and ethnic and social minorities alike. They might not vote for Prabowo, but there are already growing calls to abstain, which could do considerable damage unless Widodo is able to demonstrate, by the tone of his campaign, that he is in charge and prepared to take a firmer line with religious extremists than Yudhoyono managed to do.
calls “hidden inflation,” the result of a reluctance so far to pass on higher fuel and electricity costs. Also looming in the near future is a decision on whether to import rice, always a politically-sensitive issue in a country wrongly educated in the belief that it is self-sufficient.

**THE ECONOMY TO THE FORE**

If he is smart, Prabowo will refrain from criticizing ethnic-Chinese tycoons for their disproportionate hold over the Indonesian economy, something he has done in the past. Those same businessmen have always spread their largesse at election time, but in this race, Widodo’s choice of Amin and Uno’s own corporate connections may persuade them to spend more freely on the Prabowo campaign.

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At this early stage, not everyone sees the latest turn of events in the same depressing light. “It’s not a bad thing strategy-wise,” mused one prominent Indonesian-Chinese businessman. “If anyone can handle Ma’ruf, it is this guy [Widodo]. The far right would say this is a victory, but you could also say the president believes in the old adage ‘keep your friends close, and your enemies closer.’”

Azyumardi Azra, head of the postgraduate school of the Islamic National University, who has been a critic of Amin and the MUI, believes Widodo has stronger resolve than Yudhoyono, pointing to the incumbent’s executive order banning the extremist Islamic organization Hizbut Tahrir and his push for the swift passage of tougher anti-terrorism laws following the Surabaya suicide bombings last May.

In both cases, however, the state itself has been the target. The real worry for many progressive Indonesians centers not so much on security against extremism, but on creeping Islamization and the influence of Arab culture, which provides the pretext for violent acts and threatens to change the whole fabric of society by default.

To his credit, Widodo is already working to water down the potentially disastrous Halal Law, passed in the final days of the Yudhoyono administration and still waiting to be implemented nearly four years later. Urged on by Amin and the MUI, the law mandates halal certification for everything from foodstuffs and cosmetics to pharmaceuticals, clothing and even car-seat covers.

The president refused to sign off on the law, listenimg to businessmen and bureaucrats who say it is unworkable in practice and an invitation to rampant bribery. Instead, he assigned Vice-President Jusuf Kalla and government legal experts to find ways to use the implementing regulations to dilute some of the legislation’s more draconian measures, including automatic sanctions for non-compliance.

**WILL WIDODO BE HIMSELF AGAIN?**

Widodo’s supporters are clearly hoping that once Amin has served his purpose, he will be shuffled into the sort of a tea-pouring role Suharto preferred for his vice-presidents. While he may be an expert in Islamic banking and economics, he has none of Kalla’s experience in either business or international affairs, which also proved valuable to Yudhoyono when he was his first-term vice president.

Meanwhile, the president has a difficult task ahead reining in the trend toward religious intolerance in a country where the Muslim majority often prevents minorities from building houses of worship. “It depends on the people themselves whether the nation wants to remain united or whether [it] is easily divided,” Widodo said in this year’s annual Independence Day speech to the People’s Consultative Assembly (MPR) on Aug. 16.

The Jakarta-based Setara Institute recorded 109 cases of violations of constitutionally-guaranteed freedom of religion and belief across 20 of Indonesia’s 34 provinces between January and July this year, a significant increase over the 80 incidents in the same period in 2017. According to the human rights watchdog, the number of incidents actually dropped from 208 cases in 2016 to 155 last year, but a significant proportion of them were instigated by regional administrations through the implementation of discriminatory by-laws that run counter to the Constitution and the spirit of Pancasila.

Supported in the past by mainstream parties seeking to please vote-getting religious leaders, local governments used their new autonomous status to pass 442 Sharia-inspired ordinances between 1999 and 2012, two thirds of them in rural districts and many concentrated in Aceh, West and East Java, West Sumatra, South Kalimantan and South Sulawesi.

In an election cycle where parties are already jostling to attract votes, the House of Representatives is also considering proposed amendments to Indonesia’s colonial-era Criminal Code which, among other things, will ban same-sex relations, premarital sex, cohabitation among unmarried couples, sex education and even condom distribution.

Senior Widodo administration officials seem confident the legislation will eventually be kicked down the road, as it has been since a form of it was first introduced in 1984. But times have changed and most of the 10 political parties holding seats in Parliament have so far been unwilling to take a public position on the bill.

**LESS ROOM TO MOVE**

Like the Purnama case, Widodo also has little control over the increasingly arbitrary and repressive application of the blasphemy law, which has further marginalized Christians and other minorities. There were only eight cases during Suharto’s 32-year rule, but Human Rights Watch recorded 166 convictions during the Yudhoyono presidency and as many as 20 since then.

Only recently, in what Amnesty International described as a “ludicrous decision,” a district court in Medan, North Sumatra, sentenced a Chinese Buddhist woman to 18 months’ imprisonment for blasphemy after she complained about the loudspeaker volume at a local mosque — a common complaint, even among Muslims.

The same criticism has also been reserved for a recent MUI fatwa against the Rubella-Measles vaccine, claiming it contains traces of pork and human cells. Anticipating a public backlash, it said the use of the vaccine would be allowed for the time being until a viable alternative was found. But that won’t deter devout Muslims from following its dictate.

Right now, all these concerns are for the future, as Widodo approaches what may now be a much tougher re-election fight than he bargained for. The former town mayor is well-liked by Indonesians for his down-to-earth manner and his genuine concern for the common man. But as much as he trails in the polls, Prabowo has proved to be a resilient, combative campaigner who could make up ground if he and the youthful Uno can convince voters they can get the economy back on a growth track.

John McBeth is a journalist and writer based in Jakarta, and the author of The Loner: President Yudhoyono’s Decade of Trial and Indecision and a memoir, Reporter: Forty Years Covering Asia.