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# Islam, Politics, and Cyber Tribalism in Indonesia

## A Case Study on the Front Pembela Islam

Timo Duile

### Abstract

At the end of 2016, Islamist organisations proved able to mobilise hundreds of thousands of people for political purposes in Indonesia. In order to explain their success, the role of social media should not be underestimated, as Islamic movements rely heavily on agitation in online media. This article sheds light on the example of the Front Pembela Islam, using one of the organisation's Facebook pages as a case study. Within the algorithmic enclave of a cyber tribe, narratives and symbols are applied in memes. The research examines how narratives and symbols evoke emotions in online memes and offline banners, what narratives are addressed, and how the memes make claims regarding commonly acknowledged signifiers such as the NKRI, Islam and Pluralism. The guiding thesis is that these memes express not simply anti-pluralist or anti-NKRI notions, as opponents of these groups frequently assert, but rather combinations of robust nationalism and their alternative version of pluralism with conservative Islamic approaches. Nonetheless, threats and enemies are inevitably present as a constitutive outside and suggest a highly exclusive version of Indonesianness. Thus similar narratives and symbols applied in online media also emerge within public spaces, blurring the distinction between the online and offline realms.

**Keywords:** Islam, Nationalism, Indonesia, Cyber Tribalism, Jakarta Election, Front Pembela Islam

### Introduction

On 4 November and 2 December 2016 the largest demonstrations since the *reformasi* movement took place in Indonesia. Some even claimed that they were the biggest demonstrations in Indonesian history (Lim 2017: 412). But unlike the *reformasi* movement, the protestors did not seek democracy and liberty, instead demanding the imprisonment of the Christian governor of Jakarta, Basukri Tjahaja Purnama, commonly referred to as “Ahok”, whom they accused of blasphemy. The Islamic organisations that organised the protest claimed that 7.5 million people joined the largest rally on 2 December,

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whereas rather liberal newspapers considered a number between 400,000 and 500,000 to be more realistic (Batubara 2016). Still, the size of the demonstrations surprised both the government and liberals in Indonesia. While this mobilisation of the masses for a religious purpose was without precedent in Indonesia, it did not happen out of the blue. Concerning these new developments, political scientist Marcus Mietzner pointed out in an interview for Carnegie Council that

[...] since around September/October [2016], we have seen an additional development, and that was the reintroduction of popular mobilization as an instrument of power play in Indonesia. That is something we really have not seen since 1998, when longtime dictator Suharto fell. Since then, the focus of Indonesian political analysis has been on the state institutions – who is controlling the parliament; who is controlling the parties; who is winning elections; who is controlling the oligarchy. All of that was important so far, and we have neglected in that analysis what is happening in terms of popular mobilization (Mietzner 2016).

Analyses of mass mobilisation in the rising Islamic movement in Indonesia are a desideratum for research that encompasses several aspects. Whereas mass mobilisation from both left- and right-wing parties and organisations was a crucial feature of the political culture before the New Order<sup>1</sup> (Robinson 2018: 9), the Suharto government conceptualised the population as a “floating mass” (*massa mengambang*) for the sake of depoliticisation (Eklöf 2004: 54). This legacy of depoliticisation seemed to live on in post-Suharto Indonesia until Islamic organisations managed to mobilise masses for political purposes. Issues such as formal politics in state institutions are crucial here since Islamic organisations and their mobilisation operate within the frame of the power struggles of the political elite. However, that is just one side of the coin. In order to develop a more profound comprehension of Islamic mass mobilisation, not only must political and social circumstances be taken into account, but it is also necessary to analyse discursive strategies and the narratives of the Islamic groups. Without the mobilisation of emotions through symbols and discourses, the mobilisation of people would not be possible. It is insufficient to claim that the mobilisation was solely a matter of money politics (that is, politicians paying people to join rallies) since those claims deny the possibility of affective and emotional ties between people and political issues.

On the one hand, emotions are crucial for a functioning democracy. Rational deliberation, as some liberal political philosophers claim (e.g. Habermas 1970, Rawls 1993), is probably a rather insufficient basis for a democracy. Emotions are crucial, since they make people concerned and cause them to engage with political issues. Therefore, post-Marxist approaches, for instance, emphasise the role of “passions” (Mouffe 2000) – which are closely related to

1 “New Order” (Indonesian: *orde baru*) denotes the authoritarian Suharto era (1967–1998). The Suharto regime referred to the era of the first president Sukarno as “Old Order” (*orde lama*).

emotions. However, emotions can also be used for anti-democratic and anti-pluralist purposes since they can lead to fragmentation within society and can undermine social cohesion, especially in countries with diverse cultural and religious compositions.

Without doubt, in the rallies of 2 November and 4 December 2016 in Jakarta, emotions and passions played a crucial role. For instance, the head of the Front Pembela Islam (FPI, “Front of the Defenders of Islam”, a conservative Islamic vigilante organisation) Muhammad Rizieq Shihab – often referred to as “Habib” Rizieq – spoke at both rallies and claimed that the issue of jailing the Governor was a matter of life and death (*harga mati*) for Muslims. Whereas the rally was non-violent overall, this rhetoric reinforced passions and sentiments against the alleged blasphemer.

This article focuses on the FPI as a case study, as the organisation played a prominent role in the mobilisation of the masses. Until recently the scholarly discourse has tended to view the FPI as a rather small organisation, “not taken seriously as a religious movement by most other committed Muslims” (Bruinessen 2013: 38), and for good reason: at least among liberal Indonesians, the FPI had the reputation of being a vigilante organisation and a protection racket. On the other hand, it has to be emphasised that state institutions considered the FPI a serious organisation, for instance when its representatives were invited as experts to give statements in the juridical review of law No. 1-PNPS-1965 on the “Prevention of Religious Abuse and/or Defamation”, commonly referred to as the blasphemy law (Yonsta et al. 2014: 128–129). During the hearing, FPI leader Rizieq stated that if the court declared the blasphemy law not to be in line with the constitution, Muslims would take matters into their own hands. As the FPI was also known to be a group that carried out violence, such a statement from the FPI leader contained an obvious threat (Sinn 2014: 233).

However, until the mass demonstrations of 2016, most politicians in Indonesia might have viewed the FPI as a rather small organisation, easy to control and utilise for their own purposes. To explain that success in mobilising the masses, it is important to highlight the connection between state apparatuses such as the police or military and the FPI, since it would be impossible for the FPI to operate if state institutions did not let them carry out vigilante actions. The close ties between politicians and the FPI (Wilson 2014: 6) are also crucial, since politicians provide room for the vigilantes to manoeuvre. As Ian Wilson (2015) argued in his book on protection rackets, the strength of vigilante organisations is the result of economic dependencies and arises in states in which the boundary between state and non-state actors is constantly blurred. This phenomenon is of importance especially with regard to religion. Since Indonesia is a nation based on *Ketuhanan yang Maha Esa* (which can be translated as “monotheism”, “one supreme divine being” or “one almighty

God”), the discursive constellation blurs the boundary between the state and religion, leading institutions and politics to refer necessarily to religion (Duile / Bens 2017).

Therefore the discursive and symbolic constellations have to be taken into account in order to understand the success in mobilising the masses. This paper analyses the FPI’s mobilisation by shedding light on the narratives and symbols they use when communicating with the *ummah*, the Islamic community. The examination of narratives and symbols is operationalised through memes and banners. Thus, it is shown how emotions are evoked by combining narratives and symbols, particularly those of nationalism and Islam. The units of the analysis are banners and memes while narratives and symbols provide the frame in which memes and banners are embedded. That frame is analysed with regard to the analytical units. Narratives and symbols are analytical units too, insofar as they are constructed and reconceptualised through memes, but they also are a precondition for making sense of memes and banners. Therefore they are conceptualised as contested signifiers, with memes and banners as the methods of claiming those signifiers, of imposing a special meaning on them.

It has been convincingly presumed that social media contributed considerably to the mass mobilisation against Ahok and to the process of forming identities based on hate and religion (Lim 2017). As a case study, this article analyses online memes spread by the FPI and their *laskar cyber* (“cyber army”), since those messages – in the form of a combination of pictures and text – reached a considerable number of people through online media such as Facebook or WhatsApp. In a second step, those memes are compared to banners that appeared in public spaces after the demonstrations. This is done in order to illuminate connections between the online and offline social spheres. I argue that memes in social networks generate a certain kind of sociality through emotions that is also displayed in offline communality. By explaining links between online and offline sociality through emotions, the article seeks to overcome the dichotomy between these spheres (cf. Postill 2008, 2012). The first objects of research are memes from an online community of Rizieq’s Facebook page. That community can be termed a “cyber tribe” or “e-tribe”. Such tribes are groups which share a common loyalty to persons (a “chief”, in this case Rizieq) and concepts, usually evoked and maintained through affects and emotions. Members of cyber tribes often do not know each other in person, but shared affects (and thus emotions such as indignation) create a strong sense of belonging (Janowitz 2009: 5).

However, before dealing with the narratives, symbols and emotions, the paper briefly introduces the FPI as a religious and vigilante organisation, and its aims and history. In a second step, the political circumstances of the Jakarta election campaign are explained, since they constitute the framing in which the symbols and narratives of the FPI were articulated. Since there is not yet

much academic research concerning the recent Islamic mobilisation, the paper mainly relies on reports from media in that section.

## Front Pembela Islam: Reactionary Islamism organised

As Carool Kersten (2015) points out, Islam in post-Suharto Indonesia is deeply divided between progressive and reactionary camps. Whereas the first is eager to seek links between Islam on the one hand and liberal, pluralist and secular values on the other, applying a substantivist approach, the latter camp focuses on a rather literal interpretation of Islamic law. Many adherents of reactionary groups aim to introduce Islamic law (sharia) nationwide in Indonesia or reject the nation state in order to replace it with a Caliphate in South-east Asia. Reactionary groups usually refer to the past and the FPI is no exception here. In their view, the rejection of the so-called Jakarta Charter (*piagam Jakarta*)<sup>2</sup> in 1945 was a betrayal by secular nationalists, but the very idea of sharia law as a legal foundation of the country (in Indonesia usually referred to as *NKRI bersyariah*, the “Unitary State of Indonesia under sharia law”) marks the starting point of their concept of a society fully reconciled to Islamic supremacy (Petrù 2015: 60). Thus part of the reactionary camp pursues that agenda by establishing a hegemony of reactionary Islamic discourses through cooperation with Islamic politicians, raids against behaviour and symbolism considered anti-Islamic, as well as through agitation in social media and on the streets.

The FPI’s ideology is based on the theological argument that it is every Muslim’s duty to call other fellow Muslims to do good deeds (*amar ma’ruf*) and to reject the evil and sinful (*nahi munkar*).<sup>3</sup> In order to carry out that mission, the organisation’s internal structure is one of military ranks, with the *laskar* (“fighters”) at lower ranks carrying out intimidation and making threats (Beitinger-Lee 2009: 188). Targets of the FPI include, for instance, leftist discussions and events (since the FPI fears the rise of atheism and communism), night clubs, events associated with the LGBT community and feminism, restaurants that sell alcohol or pork, and Islamic communities that are perceived to be deviant (such as Ahmadiya or Shia). Many members of the FPI are culturally affiliated to traditionalist Islam and some are also members of traditionalist organisations such as Nahdlatul Ulama or Jami’atul Kahir. Economically, most members belong to the urban lower classes (Mubarak 2008: 228).

2 The Jakarta Charter was a supplement to the first *Sila* (*Ketuhanan yang Maha Esa*) of the *Pancasila* (“The five pillars”, Indonesia’s national ideology) which reads “[...] with the obligation for all Muslims to carry out Islamic law” (*dengan kewajiban menjalankan shari’at Islam bagi pemeluknya*; Elson 2008: 108).

3 This principle is mentioned in several verses of the Quran and is also termed *Hisbah*. It “requires every individual Muslim to command good and forbid evil conduct by other members of the society, including the state” (Esmaeili et al. 2017: 122).

The FPI was established in 1998 from paramilitary troops, gangsters (*preman*) and pious Muslims (*santri*) in order to protect the Suharto Government and Suharto's successor Habibie who came under pressure from student demonstrations. A paramilitary group, Pam Swakarsa, was joined by pious Muslims from Banten and West Java as well as by gangsters from Jakarta. Eventually they used Islamic symbols and language to counteract the alleged "communist" and "anarchic" ideology ascribed to student demonstrations. The Pam Swakarsa was the embryo of the FPI (Mubarak 2008: 227). Officially, the FPI was founded on 17 August – Indonesian Independence Day – 1998. However, it was a rather small organisation in its first years. In Jakarta, the organisation became famous when it opposed the liberal Utan Kayu community with threats and intimidation in 2005 (Pringle 2010: 170). The Utan Kayu community is an association of artists and writers such as Goenawan Mohamed and Ayu Utami with close ties to the "Network of Liberal Islam" (Jaringan Islam Liberal, JIL). It is named after their cultural centre in Utan Kayu Street, where the members conduct discussions and put on theatre plays and movie screenings concerning cultural topics from a liberal perspective, promoting views often antagonistic to those of conservative Muslim organisations. The JIL is also one of the FPI's foes, since the latter considers liberalism in general to be contradictory to Islamic teaching.

However, the first event in which the FPI appeared as an explicitly violent organisation was the *insiden Monas* ("incident at the National Monument") in 2008 when hundreds of FPI members attacked a multi-religious festival. The FPI stated that the event was *haram* – i.e. forbidden for Muslims – since it called for tolerance of "deviant" Muslims such as the Ahmadiya. Some seventy people were injured (Sinn 2014: 208) and Rizieq was found guilty of inciting the crowd to attack (Tim Viva News 2008). The FPI even garnered international attention when they successfully banned Lady Gaga from holding a concert in Jakarta in 2012. On that occasion, Rizieq stated that Lady Gaga was the "epitome of the devil" (*merupakan jelmaan setan*) and threatened his opponent by stating that if the authorities did not cancel the event, "people will take things into their own hands, including the FPI" (*masyarakat yang bertindak, termasuk FPI*) (Tirta 2012). Recently, the FPI have used public debates in order to strengthen their profile as an organisation concerned with national and religious identity. During debates on communism and LGBT rights – two state-driven discourses about alleged threats to Indonesian security, identity and morals – the FPI continued their attacks on critical discussions of the mass murder of Communists in 1965/66 as well as events organised by LGBTs, and they threatened members of the LGBT community (e.g. Rafiq 2015, Perdana 2016).

## The politics of Islamic mobilisation in the Jakarta election

There is a faction within the political elite in Indonesia that is in favour of incorporating reactionary Islam and counterbalancing it with robust nationalism. These politicians cooperate with the FPI, and the organisation also has close ties to the business elite, for instance to the ethnic Chinese billionaire Harry Tanoesoedibjo (Varagur 2016). However, a few years ago Rizieq publicly called Tanoesoedibjo an “infidel” and a “pig” who should be “slaughtered and burnt” (Wilson 2014: 6). Another example of the shifting support of the FPI is the current minister of defence, Wiranto, who was initially a sponsor of the FPI in 1998. But after he publicly supported the idea of hosting the Miss World Contest in Indonesia, which the FPI considered *haram*, the FPI strongly opposed him as a politician (*ibid.*).

The ongoing support from parts of the elite indicates that at least some of them still consider the FPI to be a suitable organisation to have as a strategic partner. In the 2017 gubernatorial election, the FPI took on a prominent role, managing to establish a regime of indignation to the disadvantage of the incumbent Ahok. The FPI denounced Ahok several times while he was still in office, for instance by portraying the eviction of people without land titles as a devilish plan of the Ahok administration in which ordinary, poor people were characterised as Muslim *pribumi* (“sons of the soil”) and the governor as a part of the Chinese elite. Seeing their chance to attack the governor, who was known for his forthright statements, the FPI organised protests both in online media and on the streets after a speech made by Ahok on 27 September became public in early October 2016.

In that speech, Ahok said that people do not need to vote for him if they believe those who use the Quranic verse Al Maidah 51 in order to fool the people. Conservative Muslims interpret the verse as a command not to vote for non-Muslims as political leaders whereas liberal Muslims highlight that the Arabic term *auliya* in the verse does not necessary mean “political leader” but rather “friend” or “ally” and that the verse should be interpreted within the context of war.<sup>4</sup> Thus the question of the meaning of the verse also became an issue in the trial against Ahok (Pratama 2017a).

In October 2016, the FPI and other hard-line-organisations began to organise rallies in order to put pressure on the court. The first large demonstra-

4 For instance, in the English translation by Hakkı Yılmaz, the term is translated as “protector, supervisor, governor” (Quran translated by Hakkı Yılmaz 2018: 489). In the translation by Muhammad Asad the verse reads “O YOU who have attained to faith! Do not take the Jews and the Christians for your allies: they are but allies of one another – and whoever of you allies himself with them becomes, verily, one of them; behold, God does not guide such evildoers”. In the comment section of the verse it is explained that the term can be translated as “ally”, “friend”, “helper” or “protector” (Quran translated by Asad (without year): 225–226). However, in many Indonesian translations the term *auliya* is translated as *pemimpin* which means “leader” (for instance: Quran translated by Adlany / Tamam / Nasution 1995: 209).



tion (*aksi bela Islam II*, “Action for the defence of Islam II”) took place on 4 November 2016 and Ahok became a defendant (BBC Indonesia 2016a). To increase pressure on the court and in order to strengthen their moral standing within society, the FPI carried out further rallies against Ahok.

The second huge demonstration was that on 2 December 2016 when hundreds of thousands of people held a mass prayer and a rally in central Jakarta. That rally came to be known as *aksi bela Islam III* (“Action for the defence of Islam III”). The *aksi bela Islam* rallies were organised by the committee called Gerakan Nasional Pengawal Fatwa Majelis Ulama Indonesia (GNPF-MUI, “National Movement of the Guardians of the Indonesian Ulama Council’s Fatwas”), a movement in which the FPI took a leading role. However, that movement eventually eroded due to internal disputes. In subsequent rallies, *aksi bela Islam IV* and *aksi bela Islam V*, the number of participants declined, but hard-line groups have proven that they are able to mobilise a considerable number of people for political purposes. Despite the fact that the FPI is well known for its threats, the organisation was very eager to highlight that the *aksi bela Islam III* was a peaceful rally (*aksi super damai*). Whereas the President of Indonesia Joko Widodo (Jokowi) did not comply with demands made in a meeting with the protestors at *aksi bela Islam II*, he appeared on the stage and thanked the protestors for their prayers for the nation at *aksi bela Islam III* (Nugroho 2016).

Despite the waves of indignation, Ahok and his running mate Djarot Saiful Hidayat gained 43 per cent of the vote in the February 2017 election, leaving the challenger Anies Baswedan and his running mate Sandiaga Salahuddin Uno in second place with 40 per cent. Since none of the candidates gained more than 50 per cent, a second round was held on 19 April 2017. In that election Ahok lost and the FPI achieved its aim of making a Muslim the new Governor of Jakarta. Anies Baswedan met with the FPI’s front man Rizieq during the election campaign, declaring that he was not a liberal but a Sunni Muslim in order to counteract rumours that he was a Shiite (BBC Indonesia 2017). The narrative portraying the Christian Governor as a blasphemer lingered on, but as time passed other narratives began to counter the indignation evoked by the FPI. The most influential counter-narrative might have been the diversity narrative, which portrayed the FPI and its approach of conservative Sunni superiority as a threat to religious and cultural diversity in Indonesia.

The point of reference for that narrative is Indonesia’s national motto of “Unity in Diversity” (*Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*). It emphasises cultural and religious diversity and the fact that there is no single religion eligible to claim a dominant role among the other acknowledged religions. In April 2017, huge banners reading *Warga Jakarta bosan dengan isu sara* (“Jakarta citizens are tired of ethnic, religious and racist issues”) appeared at important junctions (Setyadi 2017). This was clearly a statement against FPI rhetoric. Also, Rizieq

found himself sailing against the wind when lawsuits were filed against him. He was, of all things, accused of blasphemy by a Catholic student organisation, which reported him to the police due to a statement he made while preaching to his adherents (BBC Indonesia 2016b). He was also accused of mocking the national ideology of Pancasila, for which he was reported to the police by one of Sukarno's daughters.

Another suit was filed due to his derogatory remarks on a traditional Suda-nese greeting, which Rizieq considered un-Islamic. When the police summoned Rizieq, he did not cooperate but portrayed himself as a victim of a campaign aiming to depict him as a criminal (Lazuardi 2017). However, the greatest controversies arose when the FPI leader was accused of conducting a private chat with pornographic content (Pratama 2017b). Ironically, it was the FPI who had pressured parliament in 2007 to pass an anti-pornography bill. Eventually, Rizieq went on a pilgrimage journey to Mecca, probably in order to avoid prosecution.

## **Symbols and narratives of reactionary Islamism: Mobilising online and offline**

It would hardly have been possible to mobilise around 500,000 people for a rally if those people were not driven by emotions. These emotions, chiefly indignation, are veritable capital for many political movements around the globe and as such are an important cornerstone for democracy. Emotions can, however, also be used to agitate against democracy and pluralism. In the self-perception of groups using emotions for their own purposes, the struggle is usually based less on the claim that their own group is superior to others and more on the perception that their own group is suppressed or threatened by an elite or culturally alien elements within society. Thus these groups develop their own narratives, frequently leading to tribal identities and approaches. Within the political context of Jakarta's gubernatorial election, the FPI's actions produced certain forms of what Lim (2017: 423) has termed a "digital version of tribal nationalism", referring to Hannah Arendt's (1973) "tribal nationalism" concept. This tribal nationalism is (re-)produced and maintained by and within algorithmic enclaves. These enclaves emerge when

a group of individuals, facilitated by their constant interactions with algorithms, attempt to create a (perceived) shared identity online for defending their beliefs and protecting their resources from both real and perceived threats (Lim 2014: 422).

Within such algorithmic enclaves, a concept of how Indonesia should be is expressed according to acknowledged symbols and narratives. Algorithmic enclaves are highly exclusive, since they inevitably refer to a threat, a consti-

tutive outside that shapes the common identity of the group. This exclusivity generates a strong sense of belonging within the enclave. Emotions constitute affective ties within the enclave and are crucial for tribalism.

In the following, I aim to outline some narratives transmitted through memes in online media. The memes (seventy-two memes in total) were collected from the official Facebook page of “Habib” Rizieq between 8 November and 2 December 2016, that is, during a period between *aksi bela Islam II* and *aksi bela islam III*. People who had joined the group (which was shut down by Facebook Indonesia in August 2017, probably because some memes promoted hatred and violated the Facebook community standards) constitute a cyber tribe, that is, an online community whose members do not know all members in person but are bound together through affective ties (cf. Janowitz 2009: 5). At that time, about 360,000 people had “liked” Rizieq’s page. Some memes were shared more than 10,000 times. These memes also spread throughout other social media such as WhatsApp. It can be assumed that the memes played a considerable role in mobilising the masses. Rizieq himself called for a Muslim “cyber army” (*laskar cyber*), that is, for devotees of the FPI eager to spread the leader’s message on social media. However, the issue of the FPI’s online presence became the subject of debate in Indonesia after Facebook took down most FPI pages. The FPI accused Facebook of taking an anti-Muslim stance and organised rallies in front of Facebook’s office in Jakarta. While first calling for a boycott of Facebook and other Western online applications, instead promoting “Indonesian” alternatives (Novia 2017), the FPI finally admitted that they rely on Facebook (Wildansyah 2018).

However, online memes are not the only media this article deals with. The aim is to overcome the dichotomy between network sociality in online media on the one hand and community sociality in public spaces on the other (cf. Postill 2008, 2012). Therefore, banners (*spanduk*) placed by the FPI and FPI sympathisers within the public domain are analysed in a second step. The banners analysed were photographed between 2 and 19 March 2017 in areas around Manggarai station in South Jakarta. That area is in large parts inhabited by people of the lower middle class and is infamous for riots between youth gangs. Numerous gangs operate in the area and the FPI is among the most influential, frequently claiming territory with flags. In total, ten banners were photographed but it has to be stressed that many more similar banners were set up. At the time the photos were taken, however, most banners had already been removed. Nonetheless, the photographed banners provide a good example of the numerous FPI and FPI-related banners displayed all over Jakarta between January and March 2017 as responses to and public comments on political events. Due to visibility considerations, most banners appeared at strategic junctions. Often they were found near mosques, ensuring that worshippers would notice them. For instance, two huge banners were hung at the

intersection of Jalan Matraman Dalam, Jalan Dempo and Jalan Matraman Dalam II. This intersection is located close to a large mosque, as well as near several Muslim institutions, such as the Dewan Syariah Nasional (“National Sharia Board”) of the MUI (Majelis Ulama Indonesia, “Indonesian Council of Muslim Scholars”), an Islamic kindergarten and certain educational institutions run by the two large Muslim organisations Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah.

However, some banners were found near churches, such as one set up at the Tugu Tani roundabout in Cikini. This is not surprising, since displaying banners can be seen as a way of laying claim to public space; religious groups thereby claim that a certain public space is their territory. However, in February/March 2017 the police confiscated some one hundred banners reading “This mosque does not conduct farewell prayers for supporters and defenders of blasphemers” (*Masjid ini tidak mensholatkan jenazah pendukung dan pembela penista agama*), a clear instruction not to vote for Ahok (Muhyiddin 2017). The police did not manage to confiscate all the banners set up on ground owned by mosques, however. Often these banners appeared together with FPI banners.

## Online: Memes of Islamic cyber tribalism

In order to reveal the narratives present and generated through memes, I will start by pointing out some prevalent topics and motives. Since the online memes were posted in the run-up to the large rally of 2 December, it is not surprising that many depict Ahok and his statements as blasphemous. Twenty-eight memes (38.9 per cent) highlighted the topic of blasphemy (*penistaan agama*), mostly referring directly to the Ahok case. In many cases, the memes dealing with the topic of blasphemy also used nationalistic symbols and language such as the Indonesian national flag, placing the contours of Indonesia in the background or directly stating that blasphemers not only threaten the Unitary State of Indonesia (NKRI) but also oppose the national ideology of Pancasila and “Unity in Diversity” (*Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*). The latter are highly contested signifiers within the debate since all factions refer to them.

For the FPI, *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* has to be achieved under the supremacy of Islamic law, but that does not mean that they leave the signifier of “diversity” to their opponents (e.g. Figure 1). Through the connection of blasphemy and nationalism, the FPI managed to mobilise strong emotions. Overall, nationalistic language and symbols were displayed in twenty-six memes (36.1 per cent). The FPI took a clear stance here and tried to stress the role of religion (especially Islam) in national identity. The main narrative of indignation is that if religion is taunted, national identity is threatened. Unity, national stability and peace (*perdamaian*) can only be maintained when blasphemy is prosecuted.



Source: Meme No. 25, Facebook-Page Habib Rizieq, November 2016.

**Figure 1** “Mr. Jokowi, do you know that if you just let blasphemers commit blasphemy it means: 1. Harassment of Pancasila, 2. Violating the Constitution of 1945, 3. Destroying unity in diversity, 4. Destroying the Unitary State of Indonesia, ??????????, Let’s build peace without blasphemers ... !!!”

In order to stress the narrative of a threatened nation and a threatened national identity, some memes refer to well-established narratives on what can be termed the “constitutive outside” of Indonesian identity – for instance, communism. Since the Suharto government had successfully managed to establish discourses portraying the Communist Party as a latent threat to the nation, Rizieq used narratives on communism as a threat in his memes, as well. Six memes (8.3 per cent) referred to communism or the banned PKI (Partai Komunis Indonesia, “Communist Party of Indonesia”). Other threats displayed in memes include (neo-)liberalism, Zionism and capitalism as opponents of the genuine “Indonesian” and Islamic foundation for society that the FPI advocates. Some memes portray not only communism as a threat to the Indonesian nation but – referring to the 2005 MUI fatwa – also identify secularism, pluralism and liberalism as equally dangerous threats. In order to evoke emotions, statements against secularism, pluralism and liberalism are summed up in the acronym *sipilis* (the Indonesian term for “syphilis”), suggesting a relationship between sexually transmitted diseases and “Western”, non-Indonesian concepts. However, it is important here to note that the FPI understands “pluralism” differently from the genuine Indonesian concept of *kebhinekaan*: whereas

“pluralism” is portrayed as a foreign concept with the potential to undermine the purity of a religious group, *kebhinekaan*, in contrast, refers rather to plurality in the sense of a plural society in which different religious groups live side by side as clearly distinct entities.

The role of Rizieq himself has to be stressed. He established himself as the mouthpiece of the indignation movement led by the FPI, and that is very clearly shown by the memes: many memes depict Rizieq using a microphone. His facial features often express anger and indignation – that is, the same emotions the readers of the meme should feel. Rizieq’s memes evoke indignation through different strategies. One is to use a language of morality. For instance, one meme states that there is an “illicit affair” (*perselighkuhan*) between neoliberalism and communism that threatens Indonesian Muslims and the nation state.

Moral narratives occurred most frequently within the context of blasphemy, since Rizieq accused Ahok of violating the *ummah*’s dignity. This is considered the ultimate moral failure. In some memes, Rizieq points out that other blasphemers were sent to jail immediately, suggesting that Ahok, as a member of the political elite, considers himself above the law. Indignation is evoked here by portraying Ahok as arrogant, but also by pointing to other members of the political elite who are unwilling to comply with the FPI’s demand. Some memes refer directly to President Jokowi, calling him “Mr. Jokowi”, a form of address usually applied to Western foreigners. This form of address thus implicitly portrays the president as foreign. In twenty memes (27.8 per cent), the government and state institutions are referred to as enemies and as objects of indignation. However, the FPI’s aim is not to destroy the government but rather to push it towards the organisation’s goals – that is, to arrest the governor and to establish sharia law. Therefore, six memes (8.3 per cent) depict the police as an ally of the *ummah*. Despite anti-elite rhetoric, the memes clearly indicate that the FPI is not hostile to state and state institutions but rather aims to inject its ideology into them.

The issue of government and state institutions is not the only one toward which the FPI takes an equivocal approach, portraying them as objects of anger and indignation on the one hand and as potential partners for cooperation on the other. The issue of cultural, religious and ethnic diversity is also addressed in at least two different ways. Since diversity (*kebhinekaan*) is a constitutive signifier of Indonesian identity, Rizieq has to take a positive stance towards it. In his memes, it is argued that clear and strict action by government institutions to prosecute blasphemers is the best way to maintain harmony among different religious groups. However, cultural diversity must exist under Islamic superiority and be guarded by Islamic law. There are some memes referring to diversity that suggest that arresting a blasphemer is in the interest of all religious and ethnic groups (e.g. Figure 2).



Source: Meme No. 18, Facebook-page Habib Rizieq, November 2016.

Figure 2 “Demonstration to defend Islam. Demonstration encompassing all religious schools and currents. Demonstration encompassing all religions and culture. Religious and nationalist – Asy’ari and Non-Asy’ari. Native Indonesians and Non-Native Indonesians – Muslims and Non-Muslims. All agree: Apply law on the blasphemer. Does Jokowi still not understand that issue ... ???!!!”



Source: Meme No. 1, Facebook-page Habib Rizieq, November 2016.

Figure 3 Black Headline: “Netizens Protest because of a Poster of the Police”. Poster of the Police reads (left): “Maintain Diversity of the Unitary State of Indonesia and govern legitimately in a constitutional way!”

There are also occasional memes that clearly refer to a dichotomy between indigenous (*pribumi*, literally “sons of the soil”) Muslim Indonesians on the one hand and the non-Muslim ethnic Chinese, of which Ahok is a representative, on the other.

An example here is a meme (Figure 3) that expresses indignation about an Indonesian police poster. The poster promotes cultural, religious and ethnic diversity (*kebhinekaan*). The indignation supposedly evoked by “the netizens” (the Internet users) concerns the fact that a Chinese Indonesian is at the very centre of the poster. According to the comments, the man in the traditional Chinese dress is a “foreigner”, whereas many native groups are not represented in the picture. Although Ahok is not mentioned in the meme directly, it is a clear rejection of the equal status of Chinese Indonesians. Similarly, other memes refer to the lower economic status of many native Indonesians. These “ordinary people” are addressed by the Javanese term *wong cilik*. In one meme (Figure 4), for instance, Rizieq, with a facial expression showing indignation, is speaking on behalf of the *wong cilik*, asking why non-*pribumi* officials are not jailed whereas their native counterparts are sent to jail for similar offences. This evokes the perception that native Indonesians (mostly Muslims) are not treated equally in their own country. The memes take a clear racist stance here, also displayed on banners during *aksi bela Islam II*, where anti-Chinese sentiments were expressed.

Also relying on the issue of marginalised native Muslims, another meme addresses the issue of evictions: Rizieq states that poor native people (*rakyat pribumi miskin*) are evicted in order to make space for expensive apartments later inhabited by foreigners (*akan dihuni asing dan aseng*). Again, this narrative refers to nationalist sentiments but also evokes indignation by mixing in the issues of economic injustice and nativeness.

Whereas anti-Chinese sentiment is a useful tool for the mobilisation of indignation, there are two memes (2.7 per cent) in which Rizieq states that he and the FPI are not anti-Chinese. One meme (Figure 5) displays photos of Rizieq meeting Chinese Indonesian leaders, saying the FPI is not against Chinese Indonesians but combats corruption, prostitution and other sinful business. These memes are in sharp contrast to the anti-Chinese memes mentioned previously. It can be assumed that the two Chinese-friendly memes serve as “fig leaves” in order to enter *kebhinekaan* discourses and to gain recognition from nationalistic Indonesians, whereas the anti-Chinese memes are a crucial part of the indignation regime as they define the constitutive outside. Thus Chinese Indonesians are not wholly targeted but are incorporated in an alternative concept of diversity in which the supposedly advantageous position of ethnic Chinese is challenged. In order to understand these narratives, it is crucial to highlight the fact that many corporations in Indonesia are in the hands of Chinese-Indonesian businessmen. This rich Chinese businessman (*cukong*)



embodies the very stereotype of the Chinese Indonesian. As the gap between the poor and the rich widens, poor people seek narratives that explain social injustice. The lack of leftist approaches and economic analyses makes it easy for groups like the FPI to establish their narratives based on the assumption that economic injustice is a matter of injustice between Muslims and Chinese Indonesians. Not surprisingly, some memes encourage Muslims to join labour and student demonstrations for social justice and also invite trade unions to join their rallies.



Source: Meme No. 19, Facebook-page Habib Rizieq, November 2016.



Source: Meme No. 45, Facebook-page Habib Rizieq, November 2016.

Figure 4 (left) “Ordinary people ask: Until now ordinary people follow various law processes. When native Muslim officials became suspects, they were immediately jailed. Just see the examples of Luthfi Hasan Ishaq (PKS), Surya Dharma Ali (PPP), Gatot Pujo Nugroho (Governor of North Sumatra), Ratu Atut Chosiyah (Governor of Banten), and others. Now, a non-native and non-Muslim official becomes a suspect, but he is not jailed. Even though that case became internationally known and had far-reaching effects, it even holds the potential to divide the people and the nation. Why ... ???!!!”

Figure 5 (right) White Headline: “Habib Rizieq is not against Chinese”. Grey box down to the right: “FPI is not against Chinese. FPI is not against Christians. FPI is not against diversity. But FPI is against corruption, gambling, alcoholic beverages, prostitution, tyranny and immorality as well as other evils”. Grey box at the bottom: “Do all Chinese public figures meet with the great imam of the FPI for the purpose of asking whether the FPI is anti-Chinese?”

## Offline: Displaying indignation, hate and love in public spaces

As previously mentioned, banners reading *Warga Jakarta bosan dengan isu sara* (“Jakarta citizens are tired of ethnic, religious and racist issues”) appeared at major junctions in Jakarta in April 2017. That was an effort to counteract numerous banners set up by the FPI and its sympathisers some weeks earlier. These banners (or, in Indonesian, *spanduks*), were often set up in front of mosques known to be conservative. They were meant as a response to police investigations in which Rizieq was a suspect. When summoned, hundreds of FPI adherents accompanied him to the police station, indignant over the fact that a religious dignitary would be interrogated by the police. Some *spanduks* also responded to the accusations against Rizieq. But as we will see, most banners took up several narratives from the memes.



Source: Banner No. 1, photographed by author, 2 March 2017, Manggarai, Jakarta.

**Figure 6** “Ready to defend *habaib* and *ulama*. Stop the criminalisation of *habaib*, *ulama* and public Islamic figures”. “Spirit 212. Save *ulama*. Save the Unitary State of Indonesia. Save Pancasila. Refuse to understand communism (PKI)”

A huge banner (Figure 6) of about fifteen square meters near a mosque at Manggarai station, for instance, connected the issue of the accusations against Rizieq to narratives displayed in memes. The banner reads “Ready to defend Islamic dignitaries” (*Siap membela Habaib dan Ulama*) and referred to the “spirit” of the huge demonstration of 2 December (*Spirit 212*). Furthermore, the banner referred to nationalist narratives, reading “Save NKRI”, “Save Pancasila”, and “Refuse to understand communism” (*Tolak Paham Komunis*). Situated in the same line and in the same writing, the slogan “Save ula-

ma” suggested that the issue of defending Rizieq was also a matter of defining the nation’s religious foundation and thus an issue concerning the very identity of the nation. On another banner, the issue of saving the *ulama* was connected (using “&”) with the slogan “NKRI *harga mati*” (“NKRI is a matter of life and death”). Thus denouncing Rizieq is, according to these narratives, equivalent with denouncing the nation’s very foundations.

The crucial role the nation plays in the FPI’s narratives can also be seen in another banner displaying Rizieq and other *ulama* inviting the *ummah* to join a prayer for the nation. The event was the commemoration day of the Supersemar (Surat Perintah Sebelas Maret, “Letter of the Order of 11 March”), the day when Suharto gained power from his predecessor Sukarno in 1967 and established the anti-communist New Order regime. Although the New Order regime provided little room for religion in politics at the beginning, the FPI depicted its anti-communist efforts as the salvation of the Indonesian nation. The banner evokes the anti-communist foundation of Indonesian identity, and the other side of the coin is the religious foundation of the nation, since communism and religion constitute an oppositional pair of signifiers.

In some places, the FPI banners appeared together with the banners and flags of racist movements such as the Gerakan Pribumi Indonesia (“Indonesian Movement of the Sons of the Soil”; Figure 7).



Source: Banner No. 5, photographed by author, 2 March 2017, Manggarai, Jakarta.

**Figure 7** Black banner: “We are ready to protect and to guard you. Ya Habibana. Community of the lovers of Habib Rizieq Shihab”. White banner: “Movement of Native Indonesians. For Jakarta. Refuse the reclamation [Land reclamation in the Jakarta Bay, TD]”

This refers to narratives of indignation also displayed in the memes: native Indonesians, usually of Muslim faith, have to stick together against the threat of non-Muslim ethnic Chinese such as Ahok. However, relatively few banners displayed that hatred. Some displayed the other side of the coin: love for those who are considered the victims of injustice, for example, Rizieq facing police interrogations. On one banner, the text below his portrait reads in English: “We love you, Habib Rizieq”. Other banners also expressed love (*cinta*) of the FPI leader without referring directly to his enemies. But the enemy is implicitly present as the threat to the beloved. The symbols and narratives of love displayed on the banners were similar to those that appeared during the mass rallies in November and December 2016 when phrases expressing love for both Islam and the NKRI were used (Lim 2017: 411).

## Conclusion

Historically, the rise of the new reactionary Islamic movements such as the FPI is rooted in the fact that the ordinary people, workers, peasants and the urban *lumpenproletariat* have developed a common identity as a marginalised social group. After the eradication of the left in 1965, it was the collectivist, arch-political approach of the New Order which defined “a traditional, close, organically structured, homogeneous social space that allows for no void in which the political moment or event can emerge” (Žižek 1998: 991). Thus a political narrative incorporated the economically marginalised and veiled the enormous contradiction of social fragmentation that emerged. This narrative of the New Order, however, has weakened, at least since the downfall of the Suharto regime. The rise of reactionary Muslim organisations has served to replace the narratives of the New Order and its successor. Islamist organisations and leaders find language, symbols and narratives to give recognition to ordinary people, recognition that is provided less and less by the official narratives on nationalism and unity: what counts is the pride of the majority, that is, the Islamic *pribumi*, at the expense of minorities. Economic contradictions are translated into narratives of religious belonging. As in many places in the world, these reactionary narratives trump those of liberals or the left.

The latest mass movements are successful because they link religious emotions to the signifier of the Indonesian nation and the state and even to the issue of diversity. I have argued that the conservative Islamic movement is only anti-state insofar as the current state institution (president and police apparatus, for instance) are concerned, but they are by no means entirely anti-state in the sense that they want to get rid of the state and state institutions. In order to apply nationalist ideas, Islamist actors such as the FPI rely

on the state-driven discourses of the Suharto Regime (for instance when fighting the threat of communism) and on the very frame of the Indonesian nation as a religious nation based on *Ketuhanan yang Maha Esa*.<sup>5</sup> Thus crucial signifiers such as Pancasila and even *kebhinekaan* (“diversity”) are incorporated into the aims and narratives of the FPI.

Online communication through memes is an effective tool for strengthening a sense of belonging within cyber tribes. These tribes not only provide an alternative version of what Indonesia is and should be and of what diversity should mean: they also constitute their tribal identity through these narratives of Indonesianness and *kebhinekaan*. Therefore, it is insufficient to counteract these movements simply by stating that they are anti-Pancasila or anti-diversity, as supporters of Ahok did during the election campaign (Lim 2017: 412). Rather, narratives in memes and banners demonstrate how reactionary groups seek to claim signifiers such as “NKRI”, “*kebhinekaan*” or “Pancasila” since they are open to Islamic interpretations. However, the final aim of the FPI, the “Unitary State of Indonesia under *sharia* law” (*NKRI bersyariah*), would mark a major shift within Indonesian history and would end the formal status of equal rights among Indonesians of different faiths. The political aims of the FPI as depicted in the memes can be termed as aims under the umbrella of what Assyaukanie (2009: 57–96) terms the “Islamic Democratic State”, a democracy in which certain issues are considered final under *sharia* law.

Such final issues include, for instance, restrictions on freedom of expression and the prevention of non-Muslims from holding strategic political positions (Assyaukanie 2009: 14–15). The strategy of reaching that goal, as applied in the memes and in banners, portrays the majority (*pribumi* Muslims) as victims and thus as a majority that has lost control culturally, economically and politically in its very own land. Cyber tribalism and claims over public spaces using banners are both strategies to promote alternative versions of what Indonesia should be and adherents of the cyber tribe promote those narratives in their consciousness of being members of a marginalised group that is unjustly treated. The question is whether democratic state institutions are able and willing to counteract tribal nationalism by giving recognition to these people, recognition that relies not on religious forms of belonging but on citizenship and economic justice.

5 Some translate the term *Ketuhanan yang Maha Esa* as “the belief in the One and Only God” (cf. Kersten 2015: 164) or even as “divine sovereignty/ruling” (Sinn 2014: 134–135). *Ketuhanan* is the abstract noun of the Indonesian term for God (*tuhan*) while *yang Maha Esa* means “the One and Only” or “the Supreme”. The *sila* of *Ketuhanan yang Maha Esa* holds a strong notion of monotheism and thus all acknowledged religions in Indonesia are conceptualised as monotheistic religions.

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