

November 20, 2023

EXPERTS TAKE

Women's political participation and agency in Indonesia

An Interview with
RANEETA MUTIARA

In the context of the upcoming Indonesian presidential elections of February 2024, ISDP's Asia Program intern Nolwenn Gueguen sat down with PhD scholar from the Singapore University of Social Sciences, Raneeta Mutiara, to shed light on women's political participation in Indonesia. They first discussed the role of feminism in the Indonesian context before expanding on women's political agency within Islamist organizations and its effects on the upcoming elections.

Raneeta Mutiara is pursuing her Ph.D. in the Office of Graduate Studies at the Singapore University of Social Sciences. She is also an Associate Lecturer at the same university, teaching in the fields of public safety and security under the School of Humanities and Behavioural Sciences. Holding a master's degree in Southeast Asian Studies from the National University of Singapore and an honors degree in International Relations from the University of Indonesia, her intellectual approach is rooted in social and political sciences.



Her research interests revolve around religio-political movements and countering extremism in Southeast Asia. She is currently examining the Islamist feminist movements in Indonesia and how they reshape the mainstream politics in the country. Her goal is to contribute to the academic and policy discourse of the region, as well as to foster greater understanding and cooperation among its diverse communities.

Feminism in the Indonesian context

Gueguen: How is women's empowerment expressed in Indonesia?

Mutiara: First of all, we should arrive at the understanding that Indonesia is, to a great extent, still patriarchal or men-centric. Indonesia is a vast country, an archipelago consisting of around 17,000 islands with different ethnicities, customs, religions, and languages. The multifaceted aspects of it have constructed the Indonesia we live in now. So, when it comes to women's empowerment, I must say, as an Indonesian woman myself, that it is still patriarchal. Suharto's semi-authoritarian regime - it was a complicated time; some people call it semi-democratic, others semi-authoritarian - put many restrictions on women. However, after its fall in 1998, women in Indonesia rose up.

They started claiming more space for themselves to perform their roles, claimed more social and political participation, and became more confident in their voices. Most importantly, they reached a consciousness that their roles and their voices matter. Today, women in Indonesia are both thriving and striving. They are thriving because the societal mindset has evolved, now understanding that women's involvement is crucial to the development of the nation. Today, women in Indonesia are seen as having more credible agency than before. But they are also striving because patriarchy remains. The resistance to change from different segments of Indonesian society comes from people with more traditional points of view who cling to their cultures and traditions. They are not yet comfortable with embracing change.

However, I believe that we should not see this issue in black and white. Those [conservative] people do not necessarily counter feminism. Many are quite ignorant about feminism because it is seen as a Western concept or ideology. So, people are a bit reserved or even anxious about the idea because of its foreign connotations. They prefer to preserve their traditional environment and viewpoint where they are comfortable evolving instead of adopting something they are ignorant about. This is another debate, but these people can learn what feminism is, the idea behind it, and why it is so important to

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empower women because it is through learning that we eradicate our ignorance. But again, it comes back to the individual will.

Another challenge to women's empowerment is the rise of conservatism. It is not only happening in Indonesia but in many other places in the world. In Indonesia, there is this rise of Puritanism, which could be a barrier to the development of women's empowerment. Finally, there is also the perpetuation of dominating social contexts for political or power purposes, especially within the political elites who would rather subdue the voice of Indonesian women to justify and preserve their power in the country. Nevertheless, for the past couple of decades, we have observed an urgency from Indonesian women to be heard, to be included. Beyond seeking empowerment, they are stepping up to show that they are capable of empowering themselves and also their male counterparts.

Gueguen: You just mentioned that Indonesian women empower not only themselves but also men. Can you explain that aspect a bit more?

Mutiara: Yes, so the idea of women's empowerment sometimes puts women as passive subjects instead of having an active agency. For many families, I am sure, and particularly Indonesian Islamist feminists, a lot of them see themselves as having active agency that can empower themselves and whose voices matter. They believe they can be an added value to the country's policy-making process. This is how they view themselves, not as victims of women's disempowerment or a group of people waiting to be empowered.

Gueguen: That is a very interesting way of putting it. I find interesting the dissonances in the use of language; when something is actually meant to promote women, the phrasing serves to uphold patriarchal structures. Now, you brought it up in the first question, but what are the main challenges

to women's empowerment in the Indonesian context?

Mutiara: So, the main challenge for many women in Indonesia is actually the normalization of women's disempowerment. It is almost as if the idea is that women should lack certain things or women should be treated in a certain way has been deeply internalized in this society despite the operating transformation and the spirit to reform in light of such misconceptions. This all translates to a few things. The first is the insufficient law apparatus, such as a lack of regulations and bills to empower women. These misconceptions also translate to weak law enforcement when it comes to protecting the safety and well-being of women. There is also a lack of imperativeness in formulating public policies that aim for the betterment of women's rights. These issues are often raised by the proponents of women's empowerment in Indonesia. They also talk about other issues, such as sexual and domestic violence, sexual harassment, forced marriage, and gender-based discrimination, when women are deprived of opportunities due to their sex or because they bear a heavy set of stereotypes and judgments, placing them in an unequal place to men. So, these are the challenges for Indonesian society in particular.

Gueguen: How is it unique from a "Western" perspective?

Mutiara: It is quite unique as compared to the West. In the Western context, I feel like the wave of change comes from the ground because almost every woman there possesses a fighting spirit to change the system. This is my take on the dynamic of feminism in the West. A substantial number of women step further to engage in feminism. Now, unfortunately, in Indonesia, there is resistance to change and adamancy to retain the patriarchy. The interesting part is that it does not only come from the male faction of society, but it also comes

from women themselves. Now, it depends on their reasoning framework and what actually caused them to resist it. It could be due to their culture, religion, and so on. So, there is still much resistance on the ground. That is what I want to highlight, what I think is unique when we talk about feminism in the West and in Indonesia.

Gueguen: How do women's participation in politics as voters and election candidates benefit the development of women's rights in Indonesia?

Mutiara: It is definitely beneficial in many ways, but I would like to highlight five key areas. The first one is in terms of representation. Women's participation in politics ensures that their voices and concerns are heard and addressed in the policy-making process. When women are elected as representatives, they can advocate for laws and policies that promote gender equality, protection of women's rights, and better living conditions for women. The second area is policy impact. Female politicians are more likely to champion issues that affect women, such as reproductive health, domestic violence, and economic empowerment. Their influence can result in the creation of policies that specifically target the improvement of women's rights and well-being. Women's participation in politics can also influence economic policies and initiatives that support women's economic development, entrepreneurship, and financial inclusion. The third area is in terms of role models.

It is very important because women in politics serve as role models for other women and girls. I have seen women successfully engage in politics and inspire and encourage Indonesian women at large to participate in the political process, whether as voters, activists, or candidates. The fourth area is legal reform. I mentioned how our regulation in Indonesia is quite lacking when it comes to protecting women and women's empowerment. More women engaging in politics can influence legal reforms so that our regulations can benefit women. This may include changes in family law, property rights, and inheritance law. This will empower women by improving their economic status in society. The last area is socio-cultural change. This is very important because the resistance mentioned earlier actually comes from there [culture]. I hope that more representation of women in politics can change our socio-cultural environment and challenge traditional gender roles and stereotypes. This could lead to broader cultural shifts in Indonesian society because when we empower women, it will translate into the country's positive development.

Gueguen: What is the difference between Indonesian feminism within Islamic organizations and the Western perception of gender equality?

Mutiara: The main difference lies in their framework of positioning women, including [their] roles, rights, and responsibilities. In the Western Framework of feminism, the pro-women concepts revolving

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around women's empowerment and gender equality are perceived as stand-alone because everything about those concepts falls under the umbrella term of 'feminism.' It is also non-permeable, meaning that it is not open to external influences because it wants to conserve the epistemology of feminism. Therefore, it does not offer adequate room for negotiations and the plausibility of critical conversation. Critical conversation, which might be useful for the development of the concept of feminism itself, is suppressed. However, to provide a balance of perspective on this, it can also be seen as protectiveness. The women in the West are very protective of the concept because they had a rough history to get to where they are now. How this revolutionary ideology of feminism, which experienced rejection from the larger androcentric society, has eventually contributed to the development and empowerment of women across the globe. Also, I feel like we have to be careful not to homogenize feminism into a single category because there are many types of feminism, such as Marxist feminism, cultural feminism, or eco-feminism. We also should not homogenize Western feminism, as feminism in the West is not detached from the complexity of the historiography and social-political demography of the particular societies where it originates.

So, Islamist feminism has adopted the Western version of feminism. Many people will argue with me about who the pioneer of feminism was, which is still open to debate. Some scholars believe it comes from the West, others from the Middle East, and others from someplace else. It is very much still open to debate, as this happens with every concept, not only feminism. Some would say that Islamist feminism is adopting from the West; other scholars will say that they are not adopting from Western or Eastern orientation, but rather they are reviving the concept from the ground because feminism is inherent to Islam. They would say they

are reviving this understanding and perspective that the patriarchal interpretation of Islamic texts (the Quran and the Hadith) has long neglected. So, this is one standpoint. Another standpoint involves the perception by Muslim scholars that feminism was adopted from the West but that is imperfect, or it is not Islamic. Therefore, it should be subject to modifications by placing Islam in the framing of the concept.

Now, Indonesian Islamist feminists, individuals, or organizations promote gender equity rather than equality. This is probably one of the distinctive differentiating characteristics when it comes to Western feminism and Islamic feminism in Indonesia. As opposed to fighting for an equal position or equal roles to men like what is usually found in Western feminism, Indonesian Islamic feminists seek to obtain what they believe they deserve, such as the same level of respect, the same perception of worth, the same opportunities, or the same treatment as Indonesian men. In other words, instead of asserting the understanding that women are equal to men, they employ the concept of not being lesser than men. These two viewpoints, "women are equal to men" and "women are not less than men," sound quite similar, but they convey different meanings.

The patriarchal structure of society in Indonesia and androcentrism as the hegemonizing lens to view Indonesian women have caused prolonged disempowerment to many of them. These are reflected in the way women are seen as incompetent, for example, due to their biological and physical barriers. Because it has been so prevalent in society, many Indonesian women have, on a large scale, internalized these perceptions and think they are actually incompetent. The impact of this discriminating approach has reached the psychological sphere of society, shaping their mindset and subsequent behavior on how they see and treat women. For this reason, Islamist feminist

movements in Indonesia are working to address this area. Before equality, from their perspective, they must first convince the public, the system, and women in general that women are not lesser than men. Additionally, promoting “women as not lesser than men” fits the Islamic framework better than “women are equal to men.” Islam, as an ideology, has a set of fundamental rules and ideas. What they are arguing or advocating for is that those rules are then misinterpreted and later misused to the disadvantage of women. Between Islamist feminism and Western feminism, there are many intersecting or similar issues. But some are also different. For instance, Western feminism frequently discusses women in leadership, gender-based discrimination in the workplace, and abortion. Islamist feminists, on the other hand, challenge the current dominating religious practices. They would like to reform, for instance, the understanding of polygamy, the understanding of post-marital rights, and the rights of women after divorce. They also discuss what constitutes modesty, relating to the hijab and niqab, and also the role of women in a marriage between working and carrying domestic responsibilities, child marriage, and so on... which are issues that the Muslim community is facing every day. Islamist feminists in Indonesia work hand in hand with secular feminist movements in the country, promoting each other’s programs, which I think is fantastic.

Gueguen: In one of your papers, you make the distinction between Islamic and Islamist feminism in Indonesia.¹ Can you explain the difference?

Mutiara: So, Islamic feminism seeks to challenge man-centric hermeneutics. When I say hermeneutics, I mean the interpretation of religious texts. They want to revive or integrate feminist discourse within the Islamic paradigm. It means that they work with theological boundaries, providing what they believe is the correct interpretation of religious texts to reconfigure the perception of women in Islam. That is Islamic feminism. On the other hand, Islamist feminism actively introduces such conversations of reinterpretation to the socio-political realm as an alternate perspective of women’s roles in Islam beyond the intellectual arguments around the theological reinterpretations done by Islamic feminists. Essentially, political activism is the leading characteristic of Islamist feminism that is not present in the Islamic feminist groups, whose interest is mainly in the reinterpretation of the texts.

Gueguen: What narrative and group belonging do these groups offer women to attract them?

Mutiara: There are many feminist organizations in Indonesia. As I mentioned in my recent works, there are organizations such as Yayasan Fahmina, Rahima, Nasyiatul Aisyiyah, Fatayat, Alimat, and Jemaah Tarbiyah. They provide a sense of agency that many Muslim women in Indonesia are often missing. These feminist organizations serve as excellent

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platforms for women to self-actualize and express themselves. When we see the whole picture of it, in a nutshell, these groups are actually very important in the development of women's empowerment in Indonesia. The issues discussed within these Islamist feminist groups are also very attractive and relevant to the sociopolitical context of Indonesian women. They discuss issues including domestic abuse, sexual harassment, polygamy, and divorce. These issues are not often talked about outside the group's meetings. The development of Islamist feminism, especially now with the leverage of social media, has helped the normalization of the discussion on these topics and even brought them into the political arena to translate them into policies benefitting women.

Gueguen: How do you see Islamic and Islamist feminist movements navigating the religiopolitical sphere to voice their opinions successfully?

Mutiara: Impact is a huge aspect here because, in the end, it will actually be translated to more political impact in terms of regulations, gender equality, the promotion of women's involvement in politics, and women's well-being. Regulations on women's empowerment will be supported by law enforcement. So, in this sense, we realize how their presence in Indonesia actually changes the current mainstream political discourse – which is currently not prioritizing women's issues- by being present in society, advocating their objectives, and promoting gender equity. The changes in society they are advocating for will impact the country later on, and it will change the political discourse in the end. What I foresee is that in the future, if this Islamist feminist movement continues in Indonesia, I do not know how long it will take (depending on how supportive or resistant the system is), this can change Indonesian society, change Indonesian politics, and its economy. The idea is that at the end of the day, Indonesia will be a country that is very much inclusive to its female citizens in general.

Women in the upcoming elections

Gueguen: All right, so now we are going to narrow down the focus and dive into current politics, with the 2024 presidential elections. Currently, Prabowo and Ganjar are leading the voting polls.² In one of your papers, you argued that the Islamist feminist movements are “expected to support the presidential candidate who works towards encouraging the active participation of women in socio-political space, strengthening emancipation and enhancing women's political representation”.³ To your knowledge, have there been any attempts from these two candidates to entice women voters?

Mutiara: This is a very interesting question, and I cannot give a simple yes or no answer. I have identified a phenomenon in the country, which I call “digital personalization,” and it has become especially prominent in the current political dynamics of Indonesia. This digital personalization is actually a derivative of political personalization. What I mean by political personalization is [the process] whereby a portrayal or an image created by a political candidate matters much more than his political party or his political ideology. People don't want to know your ideology or your party; they want to know you as a person, your character, your personality. This is what we call political personalization. This has been translated to or can be actually observed in the digital space, especially in social media; hence, I call it digital personalization. Based on the latest data from Katadata.id published in September 2023, Ganjar has the most female voters. If we take a look at Ganjar's digital personalization, he often portrays his engagement with female public figures and female followers, as well as with a female Ulama, a prominent religious figure in Indonesia. We see how the future program of his party or policies on women does not really matter, strange, right? Many

Indonesian women do not think about what the future policies promoted by Ganjar will be like nor how Ganjar will actually position Indonesian women after he has been elected. This does not really matter anymore. His portrayal of himself on social media, especially on Instagram, has had a powerful and potent impact on how Indonesian women perceive him. The question here is: has there been any attempt from this political candidate to empathize with women? My answer will be no, as it is more [a question] of how the perceptions of Indonesian women, in general, have had an impact on this political figure. They are not promoting anything to entice female voters but focusing on building their image. In the process of building their own image, they include a lot of women's participation, engaging with women's organizations, and promoting women's followers. Without even mentioning women, the way he actually promotes and portrays himself on his social media has given him approval from them: a sense of agency and trust from the women voters to him. His character, personality, and charisma give the audience an idea of how promising his role might be for many Indonesian women. Due to all these elements, Indonesian women perceive Ganjar as someone who will help them develop their role in society and empower them. Digital personalization often creates automatic public approval.

Gueguen: [What about Prabowo?](#)

Mutiara: When I said Ganjar had the most female voters, the information came from a survey published in September 2023. Now, it seems the results changed as a new survey was published in October where Prabowo is said to have the most female voters. I know that different institutions gather data with different methods or samples, but I am not sure how they can come up with two different conclusions within a month. Prabowo is also very popular among Islamist feminists because he has been involved in digital personalization through social media, promoting women, and engaging with many women's organizations, just like Ganjar. But what he has that Ganjar doesn't is that his party, Gerindra, is one of the most conservative parties among the three presidential candidates. While Ganjar is well engaged in digital personalization, his party affiliation (PDI-P) is one of the most secular parties in Indonesia. Meanwhile, Prabowo's Gerindra is a conservative party and is viewed as an Islamic party. I think that's why the Indonesian Surveys Centre ISC found that in October, Prabowo had the highest support among the three candidates from both the people of Muhammadiyah and the NU.

Gueguen: [Speaking of which, Nadhlatul Ulama \(NU\) and Muhammadiyah are Indonesia's two major Islamic movements. How do the female wings of those movements negotiate political participation?](#)

“Indonesia’s population is more than 80 percent Muslim. So, a large portion of its women’s voters are Muslims. ...Women tend to vote for candidates who are supported by their religious groups and are seen as carrying forward their social and political objectives, especially on women’s issues.

Mutiara: We have to remind ourselves that Indonesia's population is more than 80 percent Muslim. So, a large portion of its women's voters are Muslims. When we talk about religious affiliation in Indonesia, the two giant ones are always the Nadhlatul Ulama (NU) and the Muhammadiyah. Women tend to vote for candidates who are supported by their religious groups and are seen as carrying forward their social and political objectives, especially on women's issues—for instance, the female segment of Jemmah Tarbiyah under their party, PKS. PKS has a very good relationship with a candidate called Anies Baswedan. Because of this, the female faction of PKS is most likely to vote for Anies Baswedan because they will follow the organization they are affiliated with and promote the candidate. The decision by Anies Baswedan to appoint Muhaimin Iskandar, commonly referred to as Cak Imin, as his vice president is very much political. Cak Imin has been leading NU as chairman and is leading NU's political wing party, National Awakening Party (Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa, PKB), since 2005. Thus, by gaining the approval from a leader of NU and partnering with Cak Imin as his Vice President, Anies Baswedan's electoral volume will be elevated, and he will gain more support from people affiliated with NU, including the female section. Because of this partnership, a large proportion of NU will look at Anies Baswedan and actively promote him. So that earnest decision to ask Cak Imin to become

his Vice President, while knowing that Cak Imin has been leading an Islamic political party, was done for political purposes: to get more electoral votes. So, at this point, it is challenging to predict who is going to win this political race between Prabowo and his conservative party, Ganjar and his female followers and not-so-conservative party, and now also Anies engaging with a leader of NU. At the end of the day, there are so many dynamics and variables that could influence their electability. Still, one of them is the concept of digital personalization. The stronger their influence on social media, the more convincing and persuading they become.

Gueguen: I heard that Anies' decision to choose Cak Imin as his VP was quite contested.

Mutiara: Yes, it is true. It is because it was not expected. As a leader of NU, people would expect him to couple with Prabowo. It just makes more sense to them because Gerindra is one of the conservative parties. Also, due to Anies' close relationship with PKS, the party of Jemaah Tarbiyah, people were also expecting him to nominate someone from PKS, not PKB, as his vice president.

Gueguen: As we just saw, Anies Basweda is backed by PKS, the political vehicle of the Jemaah Tarbiyah movement. In one of your papers, you argued that the women of Jemaah Tarbiyah were formidable sociopolitical agents in propagating Islamism within a democratic State.⁴ Can you

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elaborate on this agency and its implication for the upcoming elections?

Mutiara: Women and men of the Jemaah Tarbiyah will most likely support Anies. Because Anies' relationship with PKS has been well established, the women of Jemaah Tarbiyah will probably vote for Anies as well. Now, there is something interesting about PKS. Compared to other groups, they have this flexibility and ability to walk hand in hand with democracy. Their approach to activism is always soft and benevolent, which is perceived in a good light by the larger Indonesian society: Muslims and non-Muslims as well.

Gueguen: As opposed to soft approaches, there are also harsher approaches. In 2017, President Widodo set up a decree facilitating the disbanding of religious and civil society organizations to make the disbandment of hard-line Islamist organizations easier.⁵ Hizb ut Tahrir Indonesia (HT)⁶ was banned in 2019, followed by the Islamic Defender Front (FPI) in 2020.⁷ What was the extent of women's political participation or militancy in those organizations?

Mutiara: PKS and even PKB and other giant Islamic organizations like Muhammadiyah, when they operate, they do so hand in hand with democracy, which is something I feel hardline groups failed to do, which is why they were banned. When it comes to HT and FPI, the women's participation is much lesser compared to their participation in mainstream Islamist groups. Unlike the PKS and its women's wing, Jemaah Tarbiyah, these two groups were confined because they were not constructive. I would argue that they are not constructive and somewhat divisive, propagating polarized views that could threaten Indonesia's democratic social fabric. Instead of utilizing democracy as a space in order to advocate their objectives, just like the PKS, PKB, Muhammadiyah, and all the Islamist feminist organizations do, they opted for a more hardline

approach. However, the hardline approach does not work at all as it does not fit into our democratic social system. As far as I know, they did not advocate for feminism either, so I think it is crucial to differentiate them from the Islamist feminist group. Their activism, before the ban, was directed towards the critics of our secular democracy, and their objectives lay into the integration of more Islamic values and jurisprudence in the country. My conclusion is that they did not empower their women's wings because they heavily subscribe to the patriarchal interpretation of Islam. The women operated more in the shadow, like logistic ground support, but nothing more. That is how I view these two hardline groups. But to be clear, hardline groups are not to be associated with Islamist feminists because they are very different in objectives and the political mechanisms they use.

Gueguen: Do you think the crackdown on Puritan Islamic movements might impede the voice of the women taking part in those organizations?

Mutiara: I wouldn't say it will impact women greatly when it comes to women's empowerment and rights just because many of the radical movements were disbanded in Indonesia. This is because women's roles in such organizations were not strong to begin with. They were shadows in the movement. Even when they were involved, it was not in a constructive manner; it wasn't to benefit society. It was more of the assertion of Islam into our society without leaving any room for negotiations. This is complicated because the country does not stand on an Islamic foundation but a pluralist and diverse social fabric, even though there is a certain inclusion of Islamic laws to handle certain matters, especially touching on the Muslim community. As for the rest, our laws are secular, and we are not acknowledging ourselves as an Islamic country. The five fundamental principles

of the nation are called Pancasila, and one of these principles is democracy. Although our first principle is the acknowledgment of God, we do not promote ourselves as an Islamic country. The issue is that the ultra-conservative movement would like to forcefully insert Islamic ideology to diminish our democracy. Therefore, this movement experienced a lot of rejection and repudiation, even from the larger Muslim community in Indonesia.

Gueguen: So, we are reaching the end of our interview; as a closing statement, are there some ideas or issues that you would like to put forward to our audience?

Mutiara: I would want to see more women's participation in Indonesia, to see women being

more included in multiple aspects of society, socially, politically, and economically. I hope they are provided with a space to contribute and for their contribution to be acknowledged, no matter [whether it is] perfect or imperfect. I would like to keep encouraging them to believe in themselves as [possessing] influential agency that matters, to become people who matter not only to themselves or their family but to the nation. Women's issues we mentioned before, such as harassment, gender-based discrimination, or (dis-)empowerment, need to be addressed through advocacy and political participation and have to be tangible in policies. The policymakers in Indonesia should work toward enhancing policies concerning women. I believe that doing this will develop Indonesia further.

Endnotes

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