

**Analyzing Significance of Islamic Public Sphere: Study Case Jakarta 2016-2017**

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This research contains a discussion of the political case of the Islamic Public Sphere in Jakarta in 2016-2017. Taking the case of the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) as a case study that will be examined in relation to the Islamic public sphere in Jakarta. The analysis of this study uses a qualitative method with data analysis through content, and a theory in the form of the Public Sphere by Jürgen Habermas. The results of the study show that the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) is part of the Public Sphere in Jakarta in the 2016-2017 period, which greatly influences the government's decisions in determining the direction of the law in Indonesia.

**Keywords:** Islamic Public Sphere, Public Sphere, Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), Islamic Movement.

**Abstrak**

Penelitian ini berisi tentang pembahasan kasus politik Islamic Public Sphere di Jakarta pada tahun 2016-2017. Mengambil kasus Front Pembela Islam (FPI) sebagai studi kasus yang akan diteliti keterkaitannya dengan Islamic public sphere di Jakarta. Analisa penelitian ini menggunakan metode qualitative dengan Analisa data melalui content, dan teori berupa Public Sphere milik Jürgen Habermas. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan, bahwa Front Pembela Islam (FPI) merupakan bagian dari Public Sphere di Jakarta rentang 2016-2017, yang banyak mempengaruhi keputusan-keputusan pemerintah dalam menentukan arah hukum di Indonesia.

**Kata Kunci:** Ruang Publik Islam, Ruang Publik, Front Pembela Islam (FPI), Gerakan Islam.

**INTRODUCTION**

Public sphere is a democratic system that provides space for the public to enter directly into debate equally. According to Habermas, the public sphere is when a person can freely express his or her opinion without pressure that can ultimately influence political decisions (Habermas, 1989). The current Public Sphere has undergone many changes in its scope and participants, starting from physical spaces such as salons and cafes, then entering the media, and finally in digital form as we know it today (Calhoun, 1992). As we can see how the freedom of discussion space on social media is currently developing and ultimately forming the concept of a public sphere constructed by its activities. By 2016-2017, in Indonesia there was an incident that caused a huge demonstration that succeeded in filling the National Monuments (Monas) at that time. One of the factors was caused by an organization called the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) led by Rizieq Shihab.

It is intriguing situation to investigate, because the presence of the Islamic Defenders Front was not only present in the Jakarta space, but it also had an impact on the government in determining a law in Indonesia at that time. Moreover, the emergence of the problem of Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok) who is suspected of blasphemy (Indonesia, 2017). The Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) was increasingly emerging and filling the public space, particularly in Jakarta. It is apparent that they can influence the public in order to win Anies Baswedan in the regional elections, instead of voting for Ahok, Anies political opponent who is suspected of blasphemy, and also influencing the law to put Ahok in prison (Fadhlan & Azizah, 2023). This article will focus on the activities of the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) in 2016-2017 that can influence the work of the government and society in determining the direction of the law in Indonesia, especially in Jakarta. By questioning how Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) influenced Jakarta public sphere in 2016-2017 and the implication to the Jakarta public sphere. This study aims to understand the condition of the public sphere particularly in Jakarta at that time, and how FPI became part of it.

## **METHOD**

This study uses a qualitative content analysis method. Whereas I use books as a primary source of this research method, the news data was collected by the 1998-2024 as a primary as well as secondary sources, which will be used as a background for discussion to describe the condition of the public sphere in Jakarta at that time. Then I also used previous research as a discussion material that I will present through a literature review and a sub-chapter that focuses on discussing the dynamic analysis of the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) organization in Jakarta. Furthermore, the theory of public sphere in examining the signs of actions taken by the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) organization. This study only focuses on the cases conducted by the Islamic Defenders Front in the 2016-2017, including blasphemy case committed by Ahok that occurred in 2016-2017.

This theory will take us into a discussion room, where almost anyone can give their opinion through social media, which in some cases raises tensions not only in the online space, but also in the real world. The success of the public sphere that occurred at that time is quite interesting to discuss, because it can be a concrete example of the public sphere as a discourse in Indonesia. By developing the theoretical basis, I would embody several points to clarify the lines of discussion in this paper. First, explaining the concept of the public sphere and its relevance to

the public sphere in Indonesia. Hence, it was followed by a discussion of social movements and Islamism in Indonesia which will focus on the actions of the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) related to its position as part of the public sphere in Indonesia in that span of the year. Thus, I would explain a background of context the history of formation of the FPI organization and its transformation until 2017, in order to clarify its background and potential to answer the research question.

### **The Concept of the Public Sphere and Indonesia's Public Sphere**

If we talk about a democratic country, then the topic of public sphere must be included to the discussion. According to Habermas, the public sphere is a space where every individual can participate together in the debate space without government intervention (Habermas, 1989). In line to the concept, a new space for the wider community to be able to participate in the debate space can be formed. The public can distribute ideas and express them freely through the existing media, when the debate reaches the surface, these narratives can influence the government in determining policies. Therefore, in this case, Habermas argues that the public sphere functions as a mediator between the state and citizenship, as well as to ensure the openness of the government in forming public regulations through the supervision of public reason (Habermas, 1989). With the existence of the public sphere, the general public can freely voice their opinions and take part in influencing public policies made by the government.

In Indonesia, the Public Sphere has started since the beginning of the reformation era, precisely after President Soeharto deposed him in 1998. The public protests implemented in the form of riots that occurred in Jakarta and Solo were echoed as the beginning of the trigger for the 1998 reformation (Annisa, 2024). According to him, Suharto resigned as President after receiving a lot of pressure from the community and students who demanded change. These actions were carried out after a referendum conducted by Syaifrudin Jurdi in *Indonesian Political Forces* (2016) regarding the rejection of Suharto's re-candidacy to become president was announced (Raditya, 2019). And the action continued and heated up. Students and the society became more courageous when non-mainstream media began to expose their attitudes and actions in the rejection (Raditya, 2019).

According to it, it is very clear that the public sphere in Indonesia has begun to appear in the era of print media. It continues to develop until today where the public media has switched from print to digital. Nevertheless, the public sphere in Indonesia has again shown its potential

to build public perception and direct the public in forming a movement initiated by Rizieq Shihab, the leader of the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) organization in 2016.

### **Social Movements and Islamism**

The Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) began to be heard and known to the public because of its sweeping activities which were considered controversial. This group often appears in the media because of its actions of discipline against activities that are considered immoral and contrary to the teachings of Islamic sharia which often end in chaos and cause violence (Syaefudin, 2014). Because indeed, the establishment of the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) itself has the purpose of purifying Islamic teachings. Seeing that social problems in Indonesia are caused by the fact that society is too far away from religious values, and their rejection of Islamic law, so they consider Islamic law to be the solution they usually use in their sweeping activities, *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar* (Aji, 2024). They also believe that their efforts to make Indonesia a country based on Islamic law are due to its interest in solving various problems in Indonesia.

Previous research has stated that the ideas that ultimately decorate the public sphere in Indonesia and regulate the course of public opinion are dominated by the opinion of the leader of the Islamic Defenders Front, namely Habib Rizieq Shihab, including the emphasis on the importance of implementing sharia values in the life of the nation (Aji, 2024). This is since the majority of Islamic organizations in Indonesia only focus on the aspects of da'wah and education, none of the Islamic organizations in Indonesia have touched the aspect of *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar* (Susanto, 2019). The FPI Islamist social movement is still relatively new, even when it emerged in the reform era, there were already a number of Islamist movement groups that regained their significance in politics after a long period of pressure by the Soeharto government (Yilmaz, Morieson, & Bachtiar, 2022).

These groups, including the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), resurfaced as a reaction to the marginalization of these Islamist groups from economic competition, social, and political (Aji, 2024). However, Islamist movement groups and Islamic parties such as Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, have different views from the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) in their views on how Islamic civilization in Indonesia is regulated. NU and Muhammadiyah persuasively support Pancasila with the argument that they support and allow religious freedom in Indonesia (Yilmaz, Morieson, & Bachtiar, 2022).

### **Historical Context of the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI)**

The Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) officially emerged and was established in Indonesia for the first time on August 17, 1998, at the Al-Um Kampong Utan Islamic boarding school, Ciputat, South Jakarta (Syaefudin, 2014). According to Syaefudin, this establishment was pioneered by Habib Rizieq Shihab and motivated by several reasons, including such as; The long suffering of Muslims in Indonesia due to human rights violations committed by the rulers, the failure of the apparatus in law enforcement and order, the obligation as Muslims to maintain the dignity of Islam, and finally the obligation of every Muslim to uphold the *amar makruf nahi munkar*. In line to Syaefudin, this emergence is inseparable from the reform event that signifies socio-political changes in Indonesia (Syaefudin, 2014). From the background of the establishment explained by Syarifudin, the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) organization since its emergence has indeed demanded to be part of the public sphere in Indonesia.

Indirectly, they volunteer as participants in the debate space in the formation of public policies in Indonesia. This is reflected in several news reports, such as the rejection and dissolution of Ahmadiyah by the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI). Dozens of FPI members held a demonstration at the Attorney General's office in Jakarta on Friday (18/1/2008) rejecting 12 points containing Ahmadiyah's commitment to the Ministry of Religion (Depag) – now the Ministry of Religion (Kemenag) – which was considered a fraud of aqidah which for them was very dangerous and misleading (Kompas.com, 2008), which ultimately influenced the policy of the government – in this case the Ministry of Religion of the Republic of Indonesia – to issue an official dismissal to the Ahmadiyah through the Decree of the Minister of Religion. Attorney General and Minister of Home Affairs number 3 of 2008, number 33/A/JA 6/2008, number 199 of 2008 concerning Warnings and Orders to Believers, Members and or Members of the Board of the Indonesian Ahmadiyah Community (JAI) and community members (Kemenag, 2011).

In addition, Tempo.co noted that the first action carried out by the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) was a fight with 600 thugs who were suspected of being the cause of the destruction of a mosque in the Ketapang area, Gajah Mada, Central Jakarta on November 22, 1998 (Rini, 1998). Followed by a protest to close a gambling place in North Petojo and a prostitution place in Ciputat, Tanah Abang, Jakarta. And also the Indah Sari discotheque, Tanah Abang, Jakarta, on September 13, 18 and 22, 1998 (Ali, 1999). In that year, FPI intensively became a prominent

part of the public sphere in the formation of public policy in Indonesia, and closed with its action that succeeded in occupying the Balai Kartini Building in Jakarta for 13 hours on December 12, 1998 demanding that entertainment venues during the holy month of Ramadan and the first week of Shawwal be closed (Roszandi, 1998). For a full year after, Tempo.co did not record any actions carried out by the organization. However, these actions reappeared on June 1, 2000 carried out by the FPI Masses who attacked the National Alliance for Freedom of Religion and Belief (AKK-BB) in Monas, causing injuries to some of the masses of mothers and children (Probel, 2000).

In the same year, a similar action occurred again on October 11, 2000. They protested to reject the arrival of representatives of the Jewish state of Israel who wanted to attend the 104th Inter-Parliamentary Union conference in Jakarta (Ariadi, 2002). However, in the following years these actions were not recorded by tempo.co until finally the next 6 years, precisely on December 2, 2016, FPI, together with other Islamic groups in coalition held a demonstration to demand Jakarta Governor Candidate Basuki Tjahaja Purnama *alias* Ahok who was then considered to have desecrated religion (Ichsan, 2016). The series of actions carried out by the Islamic Defenders Front, since its appearance, have certain similarities and patterns of protecting religion as an object of protection, and considering religion as a weak object. However, more than that, the protests they carried out were in order to participate in the debate room by bringing their background and missions mentioned earlier.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

In this study, I found some interesting facts about the significance of the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) as part of the public sphere in Indonesia, especially in Jakarta in 2017. In explaining the significance, I will divide the explanation into two sub-themes: an explanation of the narrative used by FPI in 2016-2017, and an analysis of the impact of narrative on FPI as part of the public sphere Jakarta 2017.

### **Narrative of the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) in Public Space 2016-2017**

In building public opinion and creating a public sphere in Jakarta, there are several narratives that are commonly used by the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) to build public opinion and win the hearts of the people in order to achieve the missions of the FPI. However, I will focus on the two most frequently used narratives, and because they are both points of the other

narratives that the FPI commonly uses to participate in the public sphere, especially in 2017. The first narrative that is often heard in the mass media and print is the narrative “*amar ma'ruf nahi munkar*.” This narrative is repeatedly used as the basis for his sweeping activities. Even since its appearance, this narrative has been attached to the name of the organization, in accordance with its claim that the presence of the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) is indeed intended to fill the void of da'wah that focuses on the narrative. Even Rizieq Shihab, as the leader of the Islamic Defenders Front organization, said openly in front of the media, that FPI is an icon of *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar* (Rahadian, 2017). Such religious narratives are easier for people to accept because they enter the realm of privacy and personalization where everyone has a heart for it, and this populist movement are able to make everyone who is involved in it, feel part of it, so that it is able to arouse the passion to feel the need to take a role in it.

Basically, *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar* means to invite to do good and prevent munkar deeds. However, Rizieq brings the meaning of *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar* by associating it with the rule of law *mâ lâ yatimm al-wâjib illâ bih fa huwa wâjib* (Anwar, 2014), which means, when something that is obligated is not perfect except by doing (x), then (x) becomes mandatory. Because Rizieq interprets *amr ma'ruf and nahy munkar* as an obligatory, while social reality shows that it is impossible to do *amr ma'ruf nahi munkar* except by means of violence (x), therefore violence is also being mandatory. Thus, the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) obtained legality using violent methods which were then implemented in the form of sweeping that they carried out, in order to fulfill the obligation of *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar*. Prof. Hamdi Muluk, when asked about the emergence of populist movements in Indonesia, he replied that countries that are not yet prosperous like Indonesia are indeed more often infected by populist movements, whether they are based on ethnicity, race, chauvinistic nationalism, or even religion itself. It is not surprising that in Indonesia, narrative claims such as the call of *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar* are widely loved in Indonesia, especially in Jakarta at that time.

Although this narrative was criticized by KH Cholil Nafis, Chairman of the Da'wah Commission of the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI), by saying that *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar* must not only be in accordance with the sharia, but also must be in accordance with the law in Indonesia and must not violate the law (KompasTV, Peristiwa, 2020) and also opposed by some layers of society because its uproar (Gumilang, 2018) (Ige, 2017) (Affan, 2016). Moreover after the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) organization was closed by the government

in December 2020 (Administrator, 2020), they still chuckled and said that the narrative of *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar* must still be carried out, because according to Rizieq, the organization is only a fighting tool, not a goal (Hidcom, 2020), therefore, even if one tool falls, it can still use another tool to achieve the purpose. Furthermore, the second narrative that is also often used by the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) to represent its presence in the community is the narrative of "Islamic defenders", about how they position themselves as heroes. This was clearly recorded by the media, especially in the blasphemy case committed by Ahok in 2016.

This populist group even blatantly used the narrative to imprison Ahok, in fact, in addition to being the name of its own organization - the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) - they also used it as the name of the volume-filled demonstration – the action to defend Islam – which they were carrying out at the time (Indonesia C. , 2020). This is like an interview conducted by several media when the Islamic Defenders Front initiated a protest on December 2, 2017. In his interview, the FPI leader said that this "defending Islam" action only has one goal, namely, to imprison Ahok (KompasTV, FPI Tetap Demo 2 Desember Tuntut Penahanan Ahok , 2016). There, Rizieq said that the action they carried out with the action of "defending Islam," trying to become a hero for Muslims whose religion feels insulted and harassed.

### **Impact Analysis of the Narrative of the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) in its Role as the Public Sphere of Jakarta 2016-2017**

The two narratives that I have explained before, I consider enough to be used as material to embody the role of the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) in its position as part of the public sphere in Jakarta 2017. These two narratives will be used by the author as dualism that can represent the reverse side of how people reject and accept the activities carried out by the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) that year. Religious narratives such as those carried out by FPI had a huge impact on the public space in Jakarta at that time. On the one hand, FPI has received several rejections for the action of *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar* which is famous for its sweeping, and on the other hand it is also considered a hero because it uses the narrative of Islamic Defenders in some of its actions. This is like what happened in Pamekasan, Madura, when the Islamic Defenders carried out a sweeping action because of the alleged existence of one of the residents' houses that was used as a place of prostitution, which led to a clash and resulted in 10 victims, including mothers and minors (Gumilang, 2018). Even in Semarang, the formation of the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) in the city was rejected by dozens of mass organizations

in Semarang, on the grounds that FPI has a bad track record in various places, such as damaging and holding anarchic sweeping actions (Ige, 2017).

The rejection news is more than the two news that I have displayed, the two news are only representative that can be used to explain the potential rejection of the Islamic Defenders Front that occurred in the 2016-2017 period is less. The rejection apparently did not only come from community organizations and/or those affiliated with Islam, the rejection also came from Tito Karnavian who at that time served as the National Police Chief. This is related to the fatwa of the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI), which prohibits Muslims from using the attributes of Christmas celebrations, with which General Tito Karnavian prohibits community groups from conducting all raids and sweeping actions at various defense centers and local company offices (Affan, 2016). According to the article, the ban carried out by the National Police Chief is a form of response to the anger of some people over the sweeping carried out by the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI). Although the ban carried out by the National Police Chief is a general narrative, of course what is meant refers specifically to the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI). With this, it proves that the actions carried out by the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) can affect the flow of public debate which ultimately elicits a response from the government and participates in influencing the government in determining existing and new legislation. The Islamic Defenders Front became part of the public sphere that year and participated in fulfilling the discourse of community life in Indonesia, especially in Jakarta.

The discourse of rejection of the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) by some people apparently turned into flattery for most Muslims at that time. In 2016, ahead of the Jakarta regional elections, Ahok issued a statement followed by a quote from *Al Maidah* verse 51 (Debora, 2016). This is the right momentum for the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) community organization to release its narrative as an Islamic defender. Then on October 7, 2016, Habib Novel Chaidir Hasan, who is a religious cleric, reported Ahok on suspicion of committing a criminal act of blasphemy (Debora, 2016). This was further strengthened by the emergence of an official statement from the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) which at that time was chaired by Ma'ruf Amin, by issuing a statement containing five points, with the content of the first and second points being that Ahok had insulted the Qur'an and or insulted the ulama who had legal consequences (Kami, 2016), which was then generally interpreted as blasphemy. According to the chronology of the alleged blasphemy committed by Tirto.id, the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) carried out its first action on November 4, 2016, which was followed by a period and

crowded several points in the heart of the capital in the main area of the State Palace (Debora, 2016).

Interestingly, the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) made this case a real action to represent itself as a defender of religion. The defender of the deeds of a person – who in this case is Ahok – who has insulted and blasphemed religion, a hero for the evil deeds that have befallen many people. The author has not found any evidence or remarks that are directly recorded in the media how the Muslim community feels defended. However, if I look at the number of times that then crowded the peak action of "Bela Islam" volume 3 entitled Action 212 which succeeded in bringing in the number one figure in Indonesia at that time, it can be used as proof that many Muslims ultimately felt defended by the activities carried out by the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) at that time. The 212 Reunion Committee said that the participants who attended the Islamic Defense Action Volume 3 exceeded 7.5 million people (Indrawan, 2017). Of course, this is a fantastic number for the rally and therefore could be one of the strongest political forces that can be used to defeat other candidates. And in the end, this power was used to win Anis in the 2017 regional elections.

In the 2017 regional elections, Anis won a landslide victory over Ahok with 57.95 percent of the total valid votes (Ardhiati, 2017). With the victory, Prabowo, who at that time was Anies' supporter, appreciated the step taken by Rizieq (Belarminus, 2017). Prabowo with his statement showed that he really enjoyed the situation. The use of Ahok's case as a political tool became increasingly clear when news of a confession made directly by the person concerned appeared on the surface. Mardani Ali Sera, who at that time was the head of Anies winning team, recounted the strategy used by the Anies-Sandi pair in gaining the landslide vote. Mardani said there were two things that he used to win the 2017 Jakarta regional elections, the first was to change Anies-Sandi's appearance, and the second was to meet Rizieq Shihab to cooperate in support (Agung, 2018). The political forces carried out by the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) have really entered the Public Sphere, they have really entered the realm of debate and conducted direct dialogue to influence the public space and take part in determining the direction of the law in Jakarta.

The steps taken by the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) Anies-Sandi was finally elected as the Governor of Jakarta for the 2017-2022 period and Ahok was found guilty and put in prison for allegedly committing a criminal act of blasphemy (Atriana, 2017), even though at the 16th

session, the experts submitted by the legal team of Basuki Tjahaja Purnama or Ahok did not find blasphemy in the speech delivered by Ahok in the thousand islands (News, 2017). The two narratives used by the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) eventually brought this community organization into the debate room and became part of the public sphere in Jakarta in 2017. The anger and public acceptance of the Islamic Defenders Front, the victory of Anies-Sandi and Ahok's imprisonment prove that the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) has a role in dialogue and enters the public debate space so that it participates in influencing how the discussion space runs in Indonesia, and also takes part in the law-making carried out by the government in Indonesia, especially in Jakarta in 2017.

## CONCLUSION

The actions of the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) since its emergence in the reform era until it was finally met with an important case in its history, so that it ended with the ban of this community organization in 2020 in the era of the Joko Widodo administration, proving that FPI is part of the public sphere in Indonesia, especially in Jakarta in 2017. With some evidence of key cases that I can discuss, such as the case of the emergence of public rejection as well as how Ahok's case was accepted by the community, then the use of the power of the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) in gaining public support through the heroic action of "defending Islam" which was then used as a political force that encouraged the public not to vote for Ahok in the 2017 regional elections. and how the government then also issued a verdict on Ahok's imprisonment, all of which are evidence of the existence of the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) in 2017 as part of the public sphere of Jakarta 2016-2017 which is indeed significant.

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