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NU likely to tighten grip on next govt

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Islamic mass organization Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) has had a major influence on politics and government since its founding in 1926, but the results of the 2019 presidential election might have put it in a stronger position of power than ever before.

NU, which claims to have over 60 million members, making it the largest Muslim organization in Indonesia, publicly backed President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo's reelection bid, and managed to place senior NU cleric Ma'ruf Amin in the hotly contested vice-presidential slot.

With Jokowi all but certain to secure a second term, experts and analysts predict that the organization is set to dominate the political scene more than it ever has before.

"It looks like NU's decision to back Jokowi has paid off," Indonesia Political Review executive director Ujang Komarudin told *The Jakarta Post* on Monday.

While the official election results will only be announced next week, reputable quick counts and regional General Elections Commission (KPU) vote recapitulations show that Jokowi-Ma'ruf's apparent victory was fueled largely by overwhelming wins in Central and East Java, which are considered NU strongholds.

Quick counts and the KPU's ongoing vote counts show that Jokowi is set to beat Gerindra Party chairman Prabowo Subianto by a margin of around 10 to 12 percent, higher than the 6.3 percent lead he had in 2014.

Despite the higher margin, the incumbent's votes were concentrated in a fewer number of

Experts attribute Jokowi's significant victories in East, Central Java to NU support

NU-affiliated figures expected to fill more strategic posts

around 77.4 percent of the votes in Central Java and 65.7 percent of the votes in East Java, improving significantly on the 66.7 percent and 53.2 percent he got in those provinces last time around.

Exit polling by Jakarta-based pollster Indikator Politik Indonesia also indicated that the NU's support may have made the difference — 56 percent of respondents who were affiliated with NU said that they voted for Jokowi, compared with only 42.2 percent in 2014.

Ujang, who himself was educated in an NU pesantren (Islamic boarding school) for six years, said that the support of the NU leadership would have had a great effect on grassroots members and *santri* (pesantren students).

"In NU pesantren, there's a culture of *sami'na wa atho'na* — 'we listen and we obey,'" he said. "So the instructions of kyai [Islamic teachers] will have helped increase the support for Jokowi, particularly in East Java."

Kuskridho Ambardi, the executive director of the Indonesian Survey Institute (LSI), agreed.

"In East Java, where NU is stronger and more militant, the NU and National Awakening Party support really helped Jokowi as many NU kyai gave their backing," he told the *Post*. "In Central Java, many NU voters also cast their ballots for Jokowi, though

NU, which was formerly a political party during then-president Sukarno's reign, was sidelined during his successor Soeharto's New Order regime and many of its leaders have long bemoaned its lack of formal political power.

In the lead up to this year's elections, NU chairman Said Aqil Siradj often repeated the refrain that while NU was *ashabul haq*, "the owners of truth", it had yet to become *ashabul qoror*, "the owners of policy".

"If we want to be *ashabul haq* and *ashabul qoror*, we have to win [elections]," he said in a speech at the Jakarta Islamic Center in January.

Azis Anwar Fachrudin, a researcher at the Center for Religious and Cross-cultural Studies (CRCS) at Gadjah Mada University, said that Jokowi had actually helped increase NU's influence since he was first elected in 2014.

"Jokowi's first Cabinet had six NU-affiliated ministers, more than any other Cabinet in Indonesia's history," he told the *Post*. "But NU might expect even more given that it basically secured Jokowi's victory."

Azis and Kuskridho also said that NU might also seek to implement policies that divert more public funds to its pesantren.

"NU will likely push for policies that reaffirm NU's cultural and educational bases," Kuskridho said.

Azis added that NU would also focus on protecting its brand of moderate, traditionalist and nationalist Islam against increasingly popular rivals, as represented by the conservative 212 movement.

— SUHERDI/OKO CONTRIBUTED