

## *Notes from the Field*



# **The Case of a Christian Governor in Jakarta as a Sign of Times for Catholics (and Christians) in Indonesia**

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### **Abstract**

Blasphemy charges against Ahok (BasukiTjahajaPurnama), as he contested Jakarta's gubernatorial election, turned into a test of how successful Islamic hardliners can be in exercising influence on the moderate Muslim majority. Ahok was the first Chinese Christian governor of Jakarta in the contemporary times enjoying immense popularity. His political rivals, who are a group of extreme Muslims, exploited religious sentiment to win the election. This governor election, then, seemingly became a battle between the moderate majority, who mostly support Ahok, and the hardliners, who are clearly outnumbered.

This case points to the emergence of an iceberg appearing from the Islamic movement, some seventy years after the political independence of Indonesia. Though it does not indicate whether Indonesia will in the near future become an Islamic state, it is clear that the pendulum is swinging from the middle to the right. Responding to this recent development, minorities, especially Christians including Catholics, should redefine their place in Indonesia.

### **Keywords**

governor election of Jakarta – religious sentiment – Islam – Catholics in Indonesia – apprehensive minority

Uncertainty is looming large in predominantly Muslim Indonesia as a heated bid for governorship of Jakarta pits a popular Chinese Christian incumbent against contenders backed by Muslim hardliners. Governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, popularly known as Ahok, has fought an uphill battle since October 2016 against the ultraconservative Muslims who want to oust him and send him to jail over charges of blasphemy. The pre-election period has panned out as a proxy battle between groups of nationalists and Islamists as the latter seek to impose their own, contested interpretation of a Qur'anic verse about leaders upon the largely moderate Muslim population.<sup>1</sup> Hard-line Muslims are tapping into religious sentiment in their effort to sway the electorate even as voters have remained unwavering despite multiple campaigns against the incumbent.

Admittedly, the current election is not the first to involve religious sentiment. Yet it has dominated the political scene as it is situated in the contemporary context where social media is all pervasive. This short article portrays how Catholics in Indonesia are walking on thin ice during this highly sensitive period.

### The Ahok Case: The Tip of the Iceberg

During the last months of 2016, the political situation in Indonesia, especially in Jakarta, had begun heating up as Ahok sought re-election. The situation was unprecedented as he had been the first Christian governor in seventy years of independence. According to many polls in 2016, his electability was high; he was immensely popular among the electorate, making it difficult for other candidates to win the election without exploiting religious sentiment, which is what they did. Ahok had a few weaknesses, namely being a Chinese, showing abrasive behaviour, and so on but the weakest among them was his being Christian.

The first attempt was to raise an issue of blasphemy against Islam. Hard-line Muslims accused Ahok of insulting the Qur'an when he had cited Al Maidah 51 in a speech during a visit to Seribu Island on 27 September 2016. They tried to pressure the police and the government to bring him to court by rallying hundreds of thousands of Muslims to march in major protests.<sup>2</sup> Protesters at three

<sup>1</sup> Some others say that it was a battle of rational Muslims vis-à-vis irrational ones, since actually the other candidates are not (or were not) conservative and radical, but they gained support from the hardliners and took advantage of them.

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.reuters.com/article/uk-indonesia-politics-islamists-idUSKBN13R2OY> [accessed 10 March 2017].

rallies, which occurred on 4 November 2016, 2 December 2016, and 12 February 2017, demanded that Ahok be arrested, put on trial, and sent to jail.

The second attempt was to run a campaign among Muslims to convince them that Muslims were prohibited from electing a non-Muslim as governor based on Al Maidah 51. Ahok was not only not a Muslim but he was accused of insulting the Qur'an. The campaign was reinforced by a threat that Muslim voters who chose to elect a non-Muslim governor would not be granted a proper Islamic funeral. Many verses of the Qur'an and Hadiths were quoted to legitimize this campaign.

By using a religious issue, they intended to arouse the religious sentiment of Muslims, who make up 83 percent of the voters. In the first round of voting, on 16 February 2017, Ahok won 43 percent of the votes, leading his two rivals, who secured 40 percent and 17 percent. But, he failed to obtain an overall majority. In the run-off election on 19 April 2017 between Ahok and the nearest rival who obtained almost 40 percent, the battle proved to be a repeat of the clash between moderate Muslims versus the hardliners, and the results showed that the rival who was backed by the hardliners polled more than 65 percent of the Muslim votes. The crucial question is why are more Muslims now inclined to be hardliners than before? Given that Muslims in Indonesia are considered to be moderate, it is assumed that the majority supposedly view that religious matters should be separated from the state affairs.

To understand better why there are many Muslims in Jakarta who are somewhat prone to be provoked on religious issues, we need to turn to history. The battle between the two wings of Islam in Indonesia is indeed a long story. Up until now, even though Indonesia has the largest Muslim population in the world, it is not an Islamic state. Islam in Indonesia is 'a smiling Islam',<sup>3</sup> mostly moderate. However, over the past forty years, the face of Islam has been changing. Culturally, the Islamic voice in society has been getting more prominent. One indication is the rapid rise of Muslim women wearing a headscarf over the last thirty years. While there are other cultural phenomena which show an increasing Islamic influence within society, politically speaking the Islamic parties have never been and are still not predominant.

Such a cultural movement has grown rather rapidly first of all among less educated Muslims who are less critical.<sup>4</sup> There are indeed still nonliterate

3 Martin van Bruinessen, 'What happened to the smiling face of Indonesian Islam? Muslim intellectualism and the conservative turn in post-Suharto Indonesia', in the *RSIS Working Paper* No. 222 (Singapore: S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 2011).

4 It is estimated that more than 10 percent of the population of Indonesia are living below the poverty line. See <https://www.bps.go.id/brs/view/id/1229> [accessed 27 March 2017].

Muslims in not only rural areas but also in large cities, such as Jakarta, due to migration and urbanization. Many are uncritical of hard-line Muslim preachers,<sup>5</sup> who make hate speeches in mosques throughout Indonesia, even in the capital Jakarta,<sup>6</sup> not only on Fridays but in some cases almost every morning. This cultural progress of extremism is supported by modern information technology, both on television and through digital gadgets. This technology has also brought greater influence on middle-class Muslims. There are thousands of social media postings from Jakarta itself, many of them religious postings, including those coming from hardliners.<sup>7</sup>

Against such a background, the Ahok case could be considered as the tip of the iceberg of political Islam in Indonesia. For more than three decades, the rise of Islamic cultural influence has not translated into political influence. The majority of Muslims have still opted for one of the nationalist political parties. However, in the Ahok case in which the religious issue has been fanned by his opponents, and apparently is being accepted by many Muslims voters, results of the election have shown that the preference of the majority of Muslims could be changing.

Such a change would be alarming to the government, as Indonesia is a Pancasila state which recognizes religious and cultural pluralism and indirectly separates religion from the state. Though Indonesia formally recognizes only six religions, until at least twenty years ago, minorities, including religious minorities, were guaranteed the right to live in harmony. However, over the last two decades, some religious communities such as Ahmadiyyah and Si'ah, and communities of the six acknowledged religions, have not been able to live in peace. In Java, for instance, especially in West Java and Jakarta, it is difficult for Christians to obtain permission to build a church. Such incidents show that radical Islam is becoming more powerful, and in the case of Ahok, is alarming as Jakarta as the capital is the heart of Indonesia.<sup>8</sup>

5 The growth of extremist preachers is the reason behind the plan of the ministry of religious affairs to certify Muslims preachers. See <https://en.tempo.co/read/news/2017/01/24/241839242/Minister-Lukman-Hakim-Saifuddin-clerics-must-be-certified> [accessed 26 March 2017].

6 In Jakarta, there are 3047 registered mosques, not including *mushalla* or smaller prayer rooms. See <http://www.republika.co.id/berita/nasional/jabodetabek-nasional/16/10/28/ofr38q361-jumlah-masjid-di-dki-menurun-ini-kata-dprd> [accessed 27 March 2017].

7 Michal Sadowski, an amateur researcher calls Jakarta the social media capital of the world. See <http://socialmemos.com/social-media-statistics-for-indonesia/> [accessed on 25 March 2017].

8 See this article in *Al Jazeera*: 'Ahok: Indonesia's religious tolerance is on trial?' See <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/talktojazeera/2017/01/ahok-indonesia-religious-tolerance-trial-170128084747099.html> [accessed 20 April 2017].

### Catholics: From a Creative to Apprehensive Minority?

Clearly, the swing of the pendulum is moving from the moderate middle to the more extreme right. The golden era of religious pluralism in Indonesia is fading as the more radical version of Islam gets stronger. Cultural Islam is merging with political Islam. It is a sign of the times that cultural and religious minorities, including Catholics, are having to redefine their presence in Indonesia. Catholics can no longer live as a creative minority as in the past, but does it mean that Catholics are to become merely an apprehensive minority?

Catholics in Indonesia have a relatively long history. The first Catholic to come to Indonesia was St Francis Xavier in the sixteenth century, but he just stopped over on the way to the East. Then, Catholicism gained its foothold with the arrival of Dutch missionaries in the nineteenth century. Currently, there are about 6.5 million Catholics in Indonesia, making up 2.7 percent of the population of 252 million. It is about one-third of all Christians in Indonesia.<sup>9</sup>

Despite being a minority, Catholics in Indonesia lived a relatively peaceful and productive life among the Muslim majority for three or four decades after its independence in 1945. It is fair to say that during the first four decades, Catholics became an integral part of the nation, though at the beginning suspicion remained that Catholicism was a Dutch colonizer's religion. Catholics played an important role in society, directly through education and practical politics, indirectly through cultural influence via the mass media such as national and regional journalism. People could rightly say that Catholics in Indonesia were like 'a creative minority', a term Arnold J. Toynbee used in his well-known, twelve-volume work *A Study of History*.<sup>10</sup>

The most important Dutch missionary legacy for Indonesian Catholics was their educational institutions, especially elementary and high schools. Those schools were mostly run by religious congregations. Until the 1990s, Catholic schools were popular, not just among Catholics, because of their quality. Before the bloom of state schools, Islamic schools, and also more 'modern' Christian schools, Catholic schools were at the cutting edge. Many of their

9 Because of its limited space, the focus of this short paper is only on Catholics, without ignoring the existence of other Christians (Protestants). In a certain sense, what has happened and might happen to Catholics is a reflection for Christians in general.

10 Karel Steenbrink used the words 'confident minority' to describe Catholics in Indonesia before independence. See Karel Steenbrink, *Catholics in Indonesia, 1808–1942: A Documented History*, vol. 2, *The Spectacular Growth of a Self-Confident Minority, 1903–1942* (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

alumni, Catholic and Muslim, held important positions in government.<sup>11</sup> One of the most famous Catholic schools was the teachers' college at Muntilan, Central Java. Established in the beginning of the twentieth century by Franciscus van Lith, a Dutch Jesuit, this school dispatched its alumni to many places in Indonesia to be teachers and therefore also to become influential informal leaders in local society. Some of them became influential national leaders, among them four national heroes: Bishop Albertus Soegijopranoto, sj (the archbishop of Semarang, Central Java, the first native Indonesian bishop), Cornel Simanjuntak (composer of several national songs), Commodore Yosaphat Sudarso, and I.J. Kasimo (the first chairman of the Catholic political Party of Indonesia, a minister in the Sukarno era).

The other direct role was the political, either as higher government officers such as ministers, politicians, or activists of nongovernmental organizations. In the past, during the time of Sukarno and also in the first half of the Suharto regime, there were some Catholic state ministers who held strategic positions. In Sukarno's time, there was Partai Katolik Indonesia (the Catholic Party of Indonesia), whose politicians, though belonging to a relatively small party, had significant influence in Indonesian political life. Those Catholics could play such a role because they had a relatively better educational background.

This better educational background was also the reason why the daily newspaper founded by Catholics, *Kompas*, became the widest circulated and most influential daily from 1964 until recently.<sup>12</sup> Before the advent of digital media, this 'Catholic' daily exerted immense influence, especially on educated people. In the early years of its existence, it had many ex seminarians working there as journalists since they had better knowledge of international languages. Besides, the Gramedia group, publisher of the *Kompas* newspaper, became one of the largest media companies in Indonesia. This media company, published a number of national magazines, and through the newspaper and magazines, influenced the culture of the society. Although the Gramedia group is just a single representative of Catholics in sociocultural life, its existence can be held to represent the place of Catholics in the national arena.

Now, in the face of recent radical changes in society, should Catholics in Indonesia be reduced to a small apprehensive minority, a minority that feels threatened by the vicissitudes in society, a minority that has become weary?

11 Some additional information can be found in Karel Steenbrink, 'Jesuits in Indonesia 1546–2015'; see [http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/jesuit-historiography-online/jesuits-in-indonesia-15462015-COM\\_192544](http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/jesuit-historiography-online/jesuits-in-indonesia-15462015-COM_192544) [accessed 19 March 2017].

12 C.A.M. de Jong, *Kompas 1965–1985: een algemene krant met een katholieke achtergrond binnen het religieus pluralisme van Indonesië* (Kampen: Kok, 1990).

But we need to distinguish between 'being threatened' and 'being afraid'. Being threatened could be an objective fact, but feeling fear is surely more subjective in character.

Over the past four decades, the threat to Catholics and other Christians has been growing to look real. The role of Catholic institutions and individuals in society appears to be decreasing. With the advance of state and Muslim educational facilities, few parents view Catholic schools as the favourite for their children. Thus, fewer non-Catholic students are enrolling. According to some analysts, there is, on the one side a systematic effort to discourage non-Catholics, especially Muslims, from enrolling in Catholic schools, and on the other side, there is an effort to minimize the role of Catholic schools in society, and highlight some internal factors such as the higher tuition fee of Catholic schools compared to the public schools. Historically, educational institutions were an important, if not the most important way Catholics made their presence felt in Indonesia.

Another clear threat is in the political arena, both in a narrow and broader sense. In the narrow sense, there are very few Catholic government officials in Muslim-majority regions, even in Java. Catholic or Christian government officers have run up against protests by some Muslim hardliners who objected to non-Muslim government officials.<sup>13</sup> In the broader sense, there are less and less Catholic officers in government-run institutions, even in state schools and universities.

These two threats are just examples among others, and the Jakarta governor election in which the incumbent governor Ahok has been defeated is a test case of whether such threats might be stronger in the future. On the one hand, it seems clear that Indonesia is getting more Islamic, but on the other hand, it is still an open question as to whether this will threaten religious minorities to such an extent that they will live in fear in the midst of the Muslim majority.

Based on historical precedent and on the cultural pattern of Indonesian Islam, the answer to the above question seems to be that one need not be over-pessimistic. It is not realistic to hope that Catholics can play as great a role as before. The world has changed; the Muslim majority who are becoming more Islamic should make Catholics less pretentious. Being so does not mean that Catholics should become passive. They should be still active but in wise and more considered ways, that is, more realistic and humble.

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13 See, for example, Mathias Hariyadi, 'Islamic extremists get local official in Yogyakarta removed because he is Catholic', in AsiaNews.it on 11 January 2017. In <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Islamic-extremists-get-local-official-in-Yogyakarta-removed-because-he-is-Catholic-39630.html> [accessed 10 March 2017].

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