

PERSPECTIVE

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Old Politics Rises to Challenge New Politics in Jakarta

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- A comment by Jakarta Governor Basuki Cahaya Purnama on the use of a verse from the Quran in campaigning against him has been seized upon by sections of political Islam to escalate their attacks against him.
- The opposition to Purnama – a Chinese Christian – was manifested by a street mobilisation of at least 100,000 people on November 4 and will be followed up by another action on November 25 or December 2, under the banner “Bela Islam” (“Defend Islam”). Purnama has now been charged in relation to his speech.
- The Jakarta Governorship is now seen as a potential launch pad for the 2019 presidential elections, and political forces associated with former President Yudhoyono and former Presidential candidate Prabowo Subianto are intervening with 2019 in mind. This is because of the prospects the Governorship offers for creating a perception of achievement through incumbency. However, the limited chances of doing that within two short years encourage a resort to old political methods.
- Activist, socially conservative political Islamic groups are able to activate the support base of political Islam. This flows from the fact that they are the only actors able to project a holistic ideological outlook for solving social and economic problems, and in a society otherwise marked by an absence of active ideological contestation.

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INTRODUCTION

On November 4, 2016 at least 100,000 people rallied in Jakarta demanding that Governor Basuki Cahaya Purnama (nicknamed Ahok) be charged with “penistaan” (“blaspheming against/insulting/defaming the Holy Quran). The Governor had made a speech where he told the audience that those who did not want to vote for him in the upcoming elections because they had been influenced by people using a certain verse of the Quran, should still feel free to receive assistance from his Government.

The Islamic verse being referred to concerns attitudes by Muslims towards Christians and Jews, with some clerics, including those from the semi-formal Majelis Ulama Islam (MUI - Indonesian Religious Council), arguing that it commands Muslims not to accept Christians and Jews as political leaders. This has been rebutted by other clerics, including a former head of the Muhammadiyah, Syafii Maarif, the largest modernist Islamic organisation in Indonesia.

Ahok seemed to imply that the verse had been misused, in turn implying that the verse did not carry this meaning. As a Christian politician, and a minority Chinese, he appeared to have walked into a quagmire by suggesting that there were Muslim clerics misinterpreting the Holy Quran. At stake is a claim around the superior authority of Muslim clerics (ulama) over secular authority. The key organisations campaigning against Ahok have established a coalition entitled the National Movement to Guard the Fatwa of MUI (Gerakan Nasional Pengawal Fatwa Majelis Ulama Indonesia - GNPF). They have also reported President Joko Widodo to the Parliament for “penistaan” against the Ulama, when he refused to meet a delegation and has thus ignored MUI. They have called this a “violation”, indicating that they not only have Ahok, but also President Widodo in their sights.

On November 16, the national police announced that they have named Governor Purnama a suspect under investigation, giving the anti-Ahok campaign its first victory. Figures associated with this campaign are going further and are demanding that he be jailed while awaiting trial, and that the trial should convict him. They insist that the next “Bela Islam” demonstration will take place on November 25 and December 2. This one may be see more attacks against President Widodo.

MUI issued a statement confirming that the verse in question did indeed command Muslims not to accept Christians as leaders. Since November 4, the debate on this issue between clerics has sharpened. Some have continued to demand the arrest of and severe punishment (even death) for Ahok while others, most recently Buya Syafii Maarif, former Chairman of the Muhammadiyah, have argued that the Governor has not blasphemed against the Holy Muslim and that the verse does not command Muslims to reject Christian leaders. Old footage of the former Nahdlatul Ulama head and President of Indonesia, the late Abdurrahman Wahid, speaking at a campaign rally for Ahok when the latter was standing for election as Bupati of Belitung Timur, was widely circulated through social media. At

that rally, Gus Dur affirmed that Muslims should not accept a Christian as their prayer leader, but that religion should not be a factor in electing a public official.

The mobilisation on November 4 was spearheaded by the Front Pembela Islam (FPI), whose leader Habib Rizieq has received the most public profile as the leading critic of Governor Purnama. The mobilisation in effect has received a wider endorsement, reflected by the fact that on November 4 figures such as Fadli Zon (a central figure in Prabowo Subianto's Gerindra Party) and Amien Rais (former head of Muhammadiyah and a key figure in the Partai Amanat Nasional – PAN) participated in the rally speaking from the lead vehicle. Islamic organisations beyond FPI also organised for the rally. Members of the FPI and similar groups were also brought to Jakarta from towns in Java. The 100,000 people were provided with food and drink, indicating that the demonstration also had substantial financial backing, though it is not clear from whom.

The mobilisation was well-organised and peaceful and on the whole kept to its single demand on the government of President Joko Widodo: the arrest and prosecution of Governor Purnama. Within this framework, however, the campaign against Ahok also clearly framed him as “an enemy of Islam”. Despite this methodical approach, the demonstration did not escape breakdowns in discipline in the propaganda activities outside its direct control, including in the lead-up publicity and after the action ended. There was support from Indonesian Syria-based jihadists urging Ahok's killing on the social media and the appearance of “kill Ahok” placards at some earlier demonstrations. There had also been attacks on Ahok as a Chinese. After the official November 4 demonstration ended, violence broke out between some demonstrators who remained on the streets and the police. Cars were burned and there were also injuries. There were also disturbances in another part of Jakarta, where there is a substantial Chinese population. Some demonstrators from the Himpunan Mahasiswa Islam (HMI) were arrested, though almost all were soon released. The latest news is that some of these may be charged with offences related to public disorder.

Insofar as President Widodo gave assurances that Governor Purnama would be investigated for his alleged blasphemous speech and the process would be transparent, and that he has now been formally charged, the demonstrators must consider that they had at least a partial victory. The November 25 (or December 2) demonstration being planned is no doubt meant to press home this victory to try to ensure that Purnama is not only investigated and charged but prosecuted, convicted and jailed. Some reports have indicated that there may be some support within the state apparatus for an interpretation of events that Ahok did not blaspheme against the Muslim but that he was only criticising misuse of the Quran. This is also the position of the former head of Muhammadiyah, Buya Syafii, who has campaigned for this position over the last several days.

TOWARDS 2019

With a Chinese Christian unelected incumbent as a candidate for governorship of the country's capital, the election, which will take place in February, was bound to be a heated one. Furthermore, Governor Purnama had created bad relations with key players, having acrimoniously resigned from Gerindra, the party he represented when he was elected Deputy Governor. He also alienated significant sections of the urban poor through a systematic, vigorous and brutal eviction programme. One analyst estimates more than 25% of evicted poor people have received alternative housing.

The gubernatorial election has taken on greater meaning however, because of two intersecting processes. President Widodo's 2014 road to the Presidency was launched from the governorship, thus setting a precedent and raising expectations that whoever wins the governorship will play an important role in the 2019 presidential election. The coalition of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's Partai Demokrat, in nominating Agus Yudhoyono, is seen as an attempt to position him as a Presidential candidate in 2019. This seems also to be the reason why Gerindra, supported by PKS, is nominating Anies Baswedan, who may be hoping that Prabowo could be convinced to support him if he proved his electability in the same way that Megawati supported Widodo in 2014. There are already social media memes circulating proposing Governor Purnama as Widodo's 2019 Vice-Presidential candidate.

All the players therefore see this election as having wider implications, including President Widodo since whatever happens during the campaign and the actual result can have consequences for how serious a challenge he will face in 2019. Of particular concern to him must be that three of the parties that are formally a part of his governing coalition, PKB, PAN and PPP, have aligned with the Demokrat Party to oppose the candidate of the PDIP – Widodo's party – namely, Governor Purnama. Purnama is supported by Golkar, Nasdem and Hanura, Widodo's other coalition members. This raises the prospect of a narrowing of Widodo's support in 2019.

Furthermore, the idea that the election campaign for Jakarta governor, and even more so, actually being the Governor of Jakarta, helps pave the way to the Presidency has a significant real basis to it. At the moment, there are no obvious challengers to Widodo in 2019 who have a rising and active level of support and profile. The election of Widodo in 2014, even though the result was close, legitimised a new basis for the election of the President, namely, that the candidate should have a perceived record of achievement as a public official. Being the chief political figure of a political party, (such as Chairperson) in a context where no party has a popularity level beyond 30%, and most have much less, is not the optimal position. The Governorship of Jakarta is seen as a position from which a perception of such achievement can be built. Rightly or wrongly, and depending on what place in Jakarta society you occupy, that is the basis of Governor Purnama's relatively good standing in the polls, up until the current controversy. And if not from the Governorship, from where else can such a perception be built?

This strategy by the Partai Demokrat and its allies as well as Gerindra-PKS appears to make sense. However, there is incongruity in this situation. While Widodo did launch his Presidential campaign after being elected Governor of Jakarta, the perception of a record of achievement did not come primarily from his brief period as Governor but from his eight years as Mayor of Solo. He had been a public official for ten years before standing as President. He secured his electability with his 91% victory when elected to the position of Mayor of Solo for the second term. The problem for the Partai Demokrat and Gerindra-PKS is that they have only two years to generate such an image, should one of them become Governor. Agus, although reaching the rank of major, starts with no wide public perception of achievement, although he also has no big black marks against him yet. Agus is the son of former President Yudhoyono, who expects some of his own popularity to rub off on his son. Anies Baswedan, when serving for two years under Widodo as Minister for Education and Culture, scored no major perception of achievement. As a politician who campaigned for and praised Jokowi, but now stands with Prabowo Subianto, whom he attacked in 2014, he now has an image of fickleness or even of betrayal. Under these conditions, two years as Governor may not be enough time for these candidates to generate that perception of achievement they wish for.

This limitation to the strategy means that the positioning for the next Presidential campaign through this gubernatorial election is unable to be carried out without resort to other tactics, more resonant with the political tactics used to attack Widodo in 2014. The use of the religious issue is an example. Former President Yudhoyono made statements before November 4 defending the right to demonstrate peacefully, which were seen as adding legitimacy to the anti-Ahok mobilisation. This led to the spread of rumours that Yudhoyono was financing the demonstration, which he then denied. Yudhoyono then had to visit Coordinating Minister for Politics and Security Wiranto, and Vice-President Kalla to clarify his position. In the days before November 4, Widodo made a visit to Prabowo Subianto's ranch to discuss the situation and allowed himself to be photographed riding a horse together with Prabowo and wearing a cowboy hat. President Widodo also made high profile visits to the military and police units where he could be seen asserting his authority in those circles. Politicians from Prabowo's Gerindra party also egged on the demonstration, and rode on the lead car. Widodo also made a statement affirming the right to demonstrate, as long as it was peaceful and orderly. However, he made no comment as to whether he agreed or not with their demands. Following the outbreak of street violence after the main demonstration had dispersed, President Widodo made a statement that unnamed "political actors" were behind these events. Making statements accusing, but not naming, clandestine actors, is also very reminiscent of old style politics. It is meant to accentuate rumours that are in circulation.

These responses from all the players involved have facilitated the use of rumours, inter-elite manoeuvre, religious issues, and race, the secret funding of demonstrations held by groups outside the mainstream, asserting the authority of the military in domestic politics and dirty tricks to smash the public image of certain people (whether they are deserved or not). These

are the long-standing techniques that contrast significantly with the record-in-public-office aspects associated with the election of Widodo.

IDEOLOGICAL POLITICS

The pressure to use the Jakarta Governorship as a launch pad for 2019 combined with the necessity to resort to old elite politics tactics explains the general phenomenon of demonstration and manoeuvre that has been taking place. However it does not explain in itself the mobilising strength of a specific brand of political Islam behind recent developments. One view is that a more intolerant current has developed as a result of the passivity of the broader national political leadership. Such a critique would point to President Widodo's silence regarding Purnama's comment on the Quranic verse, and highlight the fact that the two largest Islamic organisations, the Muhammadiyah and the Nahdlatul Ulama, limited their pre-demonstration comments to merely asking their members not to take along symbols of the organisations if they attended. There was no appeal not to attend. On November 19, there were mobilisations no doubt, though smaller, by those defending a pluralist, tolerant perspective.

One national leader who did speak out against the religious sectarianism and racism in the attacks on Purnama was Megawati Sukarnoputri. In a speech before November 4, she rhetorically asked: "Why can't Pak Ahok be Governor? Is it because he has slant eyes or is a Christian. That is not Indonesia." Megawati, as Chairperson of the PDIP which is the party that nominated Purnama, needed to defend her decision. All the same, there were parts of the PDIP electorate which did join the demonstration, in particular those constituencies that had asked her not to support Ahok because of eviction of urban poor communities.

Also, statements have been made by a central leader of the Indonesian Federation of Metalworkers Union (FSPMI), and a former PKS election candidate and supporter of Prabowo in 2014, Said Iqbal, that the next national mobilisation of trade unions around wage demands will join the November 25 "Bela Islam" demonstration. This indicates that the regular defence of the pluralist outlook by mainstream elite politicians has not been effective. The reason for this is that the ideological concerns of the many members of the lower classes, are not ones that relate to pluralism and lifestyles, but rather to low income and welfare levels, and to corruption.

Radically conservative religious ideas do not find fertile ground because people are alienated from pluralism or diversity, but because they seek a holistic solution to their material and social conditions, and the radically religious can offer such a solution: namely replace the decadent corrupt elite, who are subservient to infidel and alien interests, with a moral, pious leadership that is faithful to religious law and morality. It should be noted that at the moment they are not campaigning proactively in support of any particular leader but against Purnama. It might be added that the equation between good morality and religion is also a central message of much of the popular culture featured on television today.

There are no signs that radically socially conservative political Islam is anywhere near a majority current in Indonesia, nor that its support has yet overtaken the less radical and activist politics of organisations such as Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama. However, their ability to intervene in the political process, such as evidenced on November 4 and probably again on November 25 (or December 2) is a reflection of the fact that these conservative Islamic groups remain the only political actors in Indonesia seriously trying to convince people of a comprehensive ideological outlook, connected to some form of religious rule, and mobilise them on that basis. The other major ideological currents that have existed in modern Indonesian history are no longer present on the national stage: social democracy, Sukarno’s radical socialism, communism and Suharto’s “developmentalism” have all either been destroyed or discredited.

In this vacuum, the interventions of radical, activist socially conservative political Islam will retain its energy and shape the atmospherics of national politics in the immediate future. No doubt, an increased stirring up of society by these forces will produce their own more extreme fringe, inclined to acts of violence.

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