

# PERSPECTIVE

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## **Ahok's Downfall and the Rise of Islamist Populism in Indonesia**

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### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- Incumbent ethnic Chinese Christian governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (known as Ahok) lost the Jakarta gubernatorial run-off election. Backed by conservative and hardline Islamist factions, Anies Baswedan and running mate Sandiaga Uno won decisively with 58 percent of the votes.
- Less than three weeks after his defeat, Ahok was sentenced to two years in jail for blasphemy against Islam over comments made in September 2016 that allegedly insulted the Al-Maidah 51 verse of the Quran. Ahok has since announced that he will not be contesting the North Jakarta High Court's verdict.
- Ahok lost the election despite consistently high approval ratings as incumbent. Ahok's defeat can be primarily attributed to intense religious campaigning by hardline factions that capitalized on the blasphemy accusation.
- The successful politicization of the blasphemy case shows that conservative Islamist factions have become better funded, organized, and politically connected, and thus capable of mobilizing votes at key elections. This political force is one to be reckoned with for the upcoming 2018 regional elections and the 2019 presidential election.

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## CRUSHING DEFEAT AND GUILTY VERDICT

Incumbent Jakarta governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (affectionately known as Ahok) and running mate Djarot Saiful Hidayat have been decisively defeated in the Jakarta gubernatorial run-off election held on 19 April 2017. Former education and culture minister Anies Baswedan and entrepreneur running mate Sandiaga Uno won a stunning landslide victory after securing 58 percent of the votes.

The result is a disappointing end for the ethnic Chinese and Christian governor in what has been a long and controversial campaign season marred by blasphemy allegations, civil unrest, amplified identity politics, and religious fear mongering. However, the most surprising aspect of Ahok's defeat was the large margin by which Mr Baswedan was able to win. Most respected polling organizations had predicted a very tight race or even a stalemate, so Mr Baswedan's victory left analysts wondering why earlier predictions had been wrong.<sup>1</sup>

Less than three weeks later on 9 May 2017, Ahok was dealt another massive blow when the North Jakarta District Court found him guilty of blasphemy against Islam over public comments made in September 2016 that allegedly insulted the Al-Maidah 51 verse of the Quran. Head judge Dwiwarso Budi Santiaro sentenced Ahok to two years in jail and ordered his immediate incarceration.<sup>2</sup>

Considering the political pressure and the 100 percent conviction rate for blasphemy cases in Indonesia, few had expected Ahok to be found innocent. However, the majority of analysts and general public had expected a one-year suspended sentence as per the prosecutors' demand. The much harsher verdict came as a shock for many, and Ahok's supporters immediately accused the court's decision as being politically influenced.<sup>3</sup>

Ahok has since withdrawn his intention to appeal the sentence and formally resigned from his post as Jakarta governor. The maneuver has been widely interpreted as an attempt to prevent his sentence from being enhanced by the higher court. However, in a rare move, prosecutors in the case have continued with their sentence appeal to the High Court of Jakarta despite the appeal withdrawal from Ahok's team.<sup>4</sup> The prosecutors are appealing on the basis of technicality because the judging panel had convicted Ahok based on Article 156a rather than the (slightly different) Article 156 of the Indonesian Penal Code on blasphemy that the prosecutors had initially charged Ahok with. This puzzling appeal

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<sup>1</sup> 'Survei SMRC: Anies Cuma Unggul 1% dari Ahok', <https://news.detik.com/berita/d-3472570/survei-smrc-anies-cuma-unggul-1-dari-ahok>, accessed 24 April 2017.

<sup>2</sup> 'Jakarta governor Ahok found guilty in landmark Indonesian blasphemy trial', <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/05/09/asia/ahok-trial-verdict/>, accessed 12 May 2017.

<sup>3</sup> 'Ahok's verdict: Legal theatrics or political power play?', <http://www.thejakartapost.com/academia/2017/05/15/ahoks-verdict-legal-theatrics-or-political-power-play.html>, accessed 25 May 2017

<sup>4</sup> 'Pengadilan Tinggi DKI Resmi Terima Berkas Banding Vonis Ahok dari Jaksa', <http://megapolitan.kompas.com/read/2017/05/24/16262651/pengadilan.tinggi.dki.resmi.terima.berkas.banding.vonis.ahok.dari.jaksa>, accessed 25 May 2017.

means that Ahok's legal saga is still continuing and his sentence could still be amplified (or reduced) in higher courts.

There are now many questions on the possible explanations and implications of Ahok's defeat and jailing. For one, why did Ahok suffer such a definitive defeat despite his consistently high approval rating as an incumbent? Who were the people who voted against Ahok despite being satisfied with his performance, and why did they do so? Do Ahok's defeat and imprisonment for blasphemy signal the rise of a more conservative and less tolerant brand of Islam in Indonesian society? More broadly speaking, what does Ahok's defeat in Jakarta tell us about the potential role of identity politics in the 2018 direct regional elections and the 2019 presidential election?

### **THE IMPORTANCE OF RELIGION AND IDENTITY POLITICS**

From the beginning, winning the re-election in Jakarta would have been a big challenge for Ahok. Hardline Muslim groups such as the Islamic Defenders' Front (FPI) have voiced their opposition against having a non-Muslim leader since as early as 2012 when Ahok first took office as vice governor to Joko "Jokowi" Widodo.<sup>5</sup> Likewise, during Ahok's governorship and before the blasphemy allegation came into the picture, there was already a significant portion of Jakarta voters who refused to vote for Ahok because he is a non-Muslim. For instance, a survey by polling organization Indikator Politik conducted in May and June 2016 revealed that 27.1 percent of voters surveyed said that they were satisfied with Ahok's performance as governor, but would not vote for him. The vast majority in this group are Muslims, and 72 percent of this segment stated that they either moderately or strongly agreed with the statement that "a leader has to be of the same religion as me."<sup>6</sup>

However, despite the inherent prejudice, before the blasphemy allegation, Ahok was widely predicted to win the re-election in the first round, especially considering that his approval rating was consistently over 70 per cent and his two opponents – Mr Baswedan and Agus Yudhoyono – were relatively unknown.<sup>7</sup> The tables quickly turned after the blasphemy allegation came to light, with Ahok's electability rating plunging while at the same time the proportion of undecided voters enlarged, indicating that many of Jakarta's Muslim voters became unsure about voting for him.<sup>8</sup> For instance, in Figure 1, a tracking poll by Saiful Mujani Research and Consulting (SMRC) reveals that the proportion of voters who thought that Ahok should be re-elected as governor (red line) dropped in the months following the blasphemy allegation and massive anti-Ahok street protests, while

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<sup>5</sup> 'Habib Rizieq Bicara Blak-blakan Soal Ahok, Demo FPI dan DPRD Anti-Ahok', <https://www.gatra.com/kolom-dan-wawancara/105617-habib-rizieq-ahok-kih-dan-kmp-duduk-bersama>, accessed 25 May 2017.

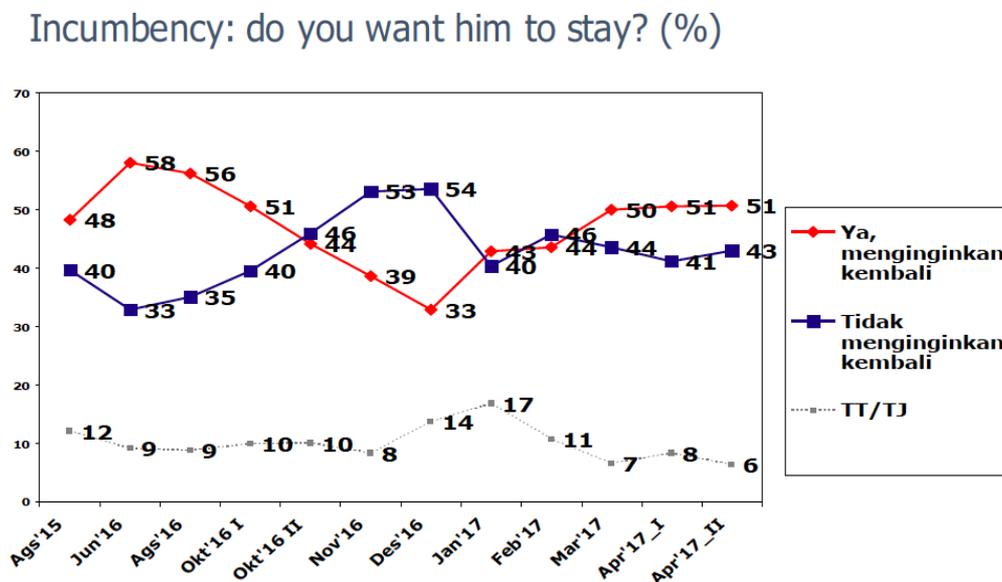
<sup>6</sup> Marcus Mietzner & Burhanuddin Muhtadi, 'Ahok's satisfied non-voters: an anatomy', New Mandala, <http://www.newmandala.org/ahoks-satisfied-non-voters-anatomy/>, accessed 25 May 2017.

<sup>7</sup> 'Public Approves of Ahok, but May Not Vote for Him: Survey' <http://jakartaglobe.id/news/public-approves-ahok-may-not-vote-survey/>, accessed 24 May 2017.

<sup>8</sup> 'Efek SARA Dalam Pilkada DKI Jakarta' <http://indikator.co.id/publikasi/opini/22/EFEK-SARA-DALAM-PILKADA-DKI-JAKARTA>, accessed 25 May 2017.

the number of undecided voters (grey line) increased. Ahok's numbers eventually recovered, but only just over 50 percent, and never to the same level as before the blasphemy allegation.

**Figure 1: Tracking of voters' perception on whether Ahok should be re-elected**



Source: Saiful Mujani Research and Consulting

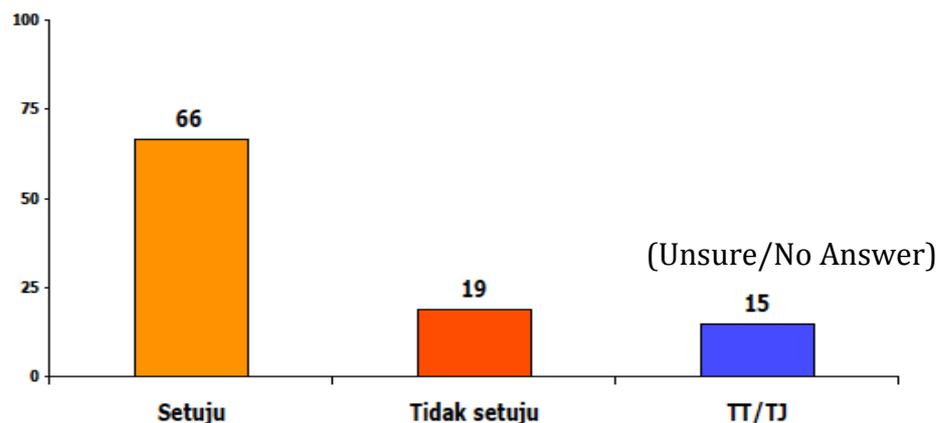
Ahok very narrowly won in the first round, and he was arguably only able to do so because more conservative Muslim voters were split between Mr Baswedan and Mr Yudhoyono. Ahok's defeat in the second round proved that his campaign was unable to win over the 18 percent of undecided – mainly Muslim – voters who had previously voted for Mr Yudhoyono. What is more, the fact that Ahok received slightly less votes in the second round meant that some of his voters from the first round decided to either abstain or switch sides to Mr Baswedan.

Much has been written about how Mr Baswedan's campaign played up on his (and running mate Mr Uno's) Islamic piety and identity.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, massive anti-Ahok street protests organized by FPI and other hardline Muslim groups, along with the anti-Ahok, anti non-Muslim, and anti-Chinese rhetoric preached by hardline leaders and then circulated widely on social media, were very effective in polarizing the Jakarta election. The majority of Jakarta's (and Indonesia's) Muslims are so-called "moderates", but when faced with the decision of whether to vote for a non-Muslim candidate who has potentially blasphemed against Islam (Ahok), or a pious Muslim candidate with some track record in governing (Mr Baswedan), the choice is clear.

<sup>9</sup> 'Identity Politics and Anies Baswedan', <https://intpolicydigest.org/2017/05/01/identity-politics-and-anies-baswedan/>, accessed 26 May 2017.

Indeed, an exit poll by SMRC reveals that out of the 58 percent of surveyed voters who voted for Mr Baswedan, 43 percent stated that they voted for him because of religious reasons and 73 percent stated that Muslims should not have a non-Muslim leader.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, as seen in Figure 2, 66 percent of those who voted for Mr Baswedan believed that Ahok had blasphemed against Islam.

**Figure 2: Exit poll on whether Anies Baswedan’s voters believed that Ahok had blasphemed**



**Ahok’s statement on Al-Maidah 51 is a blasphemy**

*Source: Saiful Mujani Research and Consulting*

To be sure, religion is not the only factor behind Ahok’s defeat. Surveys repeatedly revealed that many voters disliked Ahok’s brash mannerisms and personality. Furthermore, scholars like Ian Wilson rightly pointed out the strong class element and economic inequality among Jakartans that contributed to disdain towards Ahok and the ethnic Chinese elite capitalist interests that he represents.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, data from the Jakarta Electoral Commission (KPU Jakarta) showed that Mr Baswedan did well in poorer areas, particularly in areas that had been affected by Ahok’s forced eviction policies in North and East Jakarta.<sup>12</sup> Exit polls from Indikator Politik and SMRC also revealed that lower income earners (those earning less than 4 million Rupiahs per month) are more likely to

<sup>10</sup> SMRC exit poll data, presented by Dr Djayadi Hanan in the seminar “Jakarta gubernatorial Election of 2017: Identity, Personality, and Incumbency Factors” at ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 22 May 2017.

<sup>11</sup> Ian Wilson, ‘Jakarta: inequality and the poverty of elite pluralism’, New Mandala, <http://www.newmandala.org/jakarta-inequality-poverty-elite-pluralism/>, accessed 24 May 2017.

<sup>12</sup> KPU Jakarta, ‘Pilkada Provinsi DKI Jakarta (Putaran Kedua)’, [https://pilkada2017.kpu.go.id/hasil/2/t1/dki\\_jakarta](https://pilkada2017.kpu.go.id/hasil/2/t1/dki_jakarta), accessed 25 May 2017.

vote for Mr Baswedan.<sup>13</sup> This would explain why Mr Baswedan's campaign promise of economic incentives such as housing loans without deposits has boosted his popularity among voters in poorer areas.

However, class and economic discontent cannot explain why voters across different socio-economic classes (including those from middle and upper classes) did not vote for Ahok despite being happy with his performance and policies as incumbent. This analysis is supported by round two exit polls from Indikator Politik revealing that up until the time of Ahok's defeat, 72 percent of surveyed voters were happy with his performance. However, 39 percent of this satisfied segment said that they did not vote for him because of religious reasons.<sup>14</sup>

Mr Baswedan's landslide victory indicates that religion and primordial sentiments played a much more important role in determining voting behavior than previously thought. Furthermore, the socio-political commotion and pressure successfully applied by hardline Muslim groups showed that their influence (or at least the influence of their conservative rhetoric) is increasing among the Muslim public. Ahok lost the election despite last-minute endorsements by moderate Islamic parties PKB (National Awakening Party) and PPP (Development United Party), as well as support from some influential moderate Muslim clerics.

While many Muslims also voted for Ahok (around 33 percent according to most exit polls), Ahok's decisive defeat reflects the deep-seated importance of religion for contemporary Indonesian voters, particularly in situations of "crisis" where their core religious values are supposedly at stake. Not just among Muslims, exit polls show that 95 percent of Jakarta's non-Muslims voted for Ahok.

The Jakarta election has been portrayed as a battle between "rational" voters who voted for Ahok because of his track record, and "religious/emotional" voters who voted for Mr Baswedan because of religious reasons. However, the reality is much more complex than this simplistic dichotomy. Ahok's defeat was the result of a complicated interrelation between religious politicization, class aspirations, race prejudice, as well as not a small amount of pragmatism among those who viewed Mr Baswedan as the overall safer option.

## **IMPLICATIONS OF AHOK'S GUILTY VERDICT AND JAILING**

Now Ahok is in jail for two years for blasphemy. Immediately, analysts began to speculate on the reasons why the judges decided on such a severe punishment, especially since the

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<sup>13</sup> Liam Gammon & Eve Warburton, 'Class dismissed? Economic fairness and identity politics in Indonesia', New Mandala, <http://www.newmandala.org/economic-injustice-identity-politics-indonesia/>, accessed 25 May 2017.

<sup>14</sup> Indikator Politik survey on 'Exit Poll Pilgub DKI Jakarta Putaran Kedua' ('Exit Poll Second Round of Jakarta Gubernatorial Election'), released 19 April 2017. See also Liam Gammon & Eve Warburton, 'Class dismissed? Economic fairness and identity politics in Indonesia', New Mandala, <http://www.newmandala.org/economic-injustice-identity-politics-indonesia/>, accessed 25 May 2017.

blasphemy allegation had already cost Ahok the Jakarta gubernatorial election. Many of Ahok's supporters accuse the judging panel of succumbing to religious and political pressures.<sup>15</sup>

The entire blasphemy allegation, investigation, prosecution, and trial against Ahok had been marred with irregularities from the beginning. There were important procedures – such as the issuing of official investigation notices – that were by-passed for the sake of expediting the case.<sup>16</sup> The investigation and prosecution processes were done very swiftly, and the trial continued despite appeals for the trial to be postponed until after the election for the sake of maintaining a fair election and civic peace.

Perhaps most importantly, during sentencing, as the judges dissected the Al-Maidah verse, they endorsed the interpretation of Rizieq Shihab, FPI's firebrand leader, who argued that the verse forbids Muslims from voting for non-Muslims.<sup>17</sup> By doing so, the judging panel inadvertently gave legitimacy towards the rhetoric that hardliners have been preaching all along.

It is possible that the verdict was intended to appease conservative Muslim factions. However, any hope of ever appeasing Islamic hard-liners is unrealistic, with anti-Ahok protesters already complaining that the sentence was not harsh enough. If anything, the outcome of Ahok's trial only serves to embolden the hardliners.

In the explanation letter that was read out by his tearful wife Veronica Tan, Ahok said that he decided not to appeal because he did not want to further disrupt Indonesia's political and economic stability by prolonging the court case.<sup>18</sup> However, aside from what is formally stated, there are a number of possibilities why Ahok and his team decided not to appeal. One possibility is that Ahok understood that his sentence might actually be enhanced rather than reduced upon appeal. Stopping the court proceedings now would also calm the political situation amidst fears of further massive street protests or even riots if Ahok gets a reduced sentence.

In the meantime, Jakarta remains bitterly divided over the issue of Ahok's defeat and jailing. Activists, minority groups, and Indonesia's progressives are among those now worried that the rising influence of hardline Muslim groups would lead to more use of the blasphemy law as a tool to oppress non-Muslims and other minority groups.

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<sup>15</sup> 'Judges bow to political pressure in Ahok's trial: PDI-P', [http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2017/05/10/judges-bow-to-political-pressure-in-ahoks-trial-pdi-p.html?fb\\_comment\\_id=1464720486883086\\_1466126526742482](http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2017/05/10/judges-bow-to-political-pressure-in-ahoks-trial-pdi-p.html?fb_comment_id=1464720486883086_1466126526742482), accessed 26 May 2017.

<sup>16</sup> 'Ahok's absurd trial won't satisfy anybody', <http://www.newmandala.org/absurdity-ahoks-trial/>, accessed 26 May 2017.

<sup>17</sup> 'Hakim: Ahok Merendahkan Surat Al-Maidah 51', <https://news.detik.com/berita/d-3496149/hakim-ahok-merendahkan-surat-al-maidah-51>, accessed 25 May 2017.

<sup>18</sup> 'Tearful Veronica reads Ahok letter on reasons for appeal withdrawal', <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2017/05/23/teary-veronica-reads-ahok-letter-on-reasons-for-appeal-withdrawal.html>, accessed 26 May 2017.

Ultimately, a major part of the problem here is the existence of Indonesia's blasphemy law itself. Since 2005, there have been at least 106 cases of blasphemy prosecution in Indonesia, almost all of them in prosecution of members of a religious minority, and all of them resulting in a guilty verdict.<sup>19</sup> There are now calls for Jokowi's government to abolish the blasphemy law and be firmer in dealing with hardline Muslim groups.

While there are no signs that the blasphemy law will be repealed anytime soon, Jokowi's administration has recently made moves to curb the increasing power and influence of radical Muslim groups. On the eve of Ahok's sentencing, the Indonesian government moved to ban Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia, one of the hardline Muslim groups behind the massive anti-Ahok protests.<sup>20</sup> Although many in Indonesia support the ban, others label it as undemocratic, and there are also fears that such a move would provoke and strengthen the resolve of Islamic hard-liners even more.<sup>21</sup>

As for Ahok, anyone who thinks that this is the end of his political career would be mistaken. Ahok's guilty verdict only served to increase his martyr status in the eyes of his supporters, and Ahok is now an even bigger symbol of struggle for Indonesia's liberals and progressives. In the days after sentencing, thousands of Ahok's supporters held candle light vigils in cities both within and outside Indonesia to show their support. This is not to mention the outpouring of support expressed through social media. It is too early to speculate, but it can be expected that Ahok will make a political comeback after he is released from jail.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR THE 2018 REGIONAL ELECTIONS AND 2019 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION**

The fact that a major political figure such as Ahok could be toppled through the use of primordial rhetoric sends an alarming message to Indonesia's religious and ethnic minorities, particularly those with political aspirations in the lead-up to the 2018 direct regional elections to be held in June 2018.

So far, there are many examples of politicians from ethnic or religious minorities being elected to lead in Muslim-majority areas, some of whom are supported by Islamic parties. However, it is foreseeable that some political operators may try to emulate the successful use of Islamic rhetoric in Jakarta as a tool to stop voters from voting for non-Muslim candidates in other areas of Indonesia.

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<sup>19</sup> Gwenaël Njoto-Feillard, 'Religious Pluralism and Tolerance in Jokowi's Indonesia', ISEAS Perspective, 2015, No. 10

([https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS\\_Perspective\\_2015\\_10.pdf](https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS_Perspective_2015_10.pdf))

<sup>20</sup> 'Pembubaran HTI: akhir gerakan anti-Pancasila atau justru mencoreng demokrasi?'

<http://www.bbc.com/indonesia/trensosial-39843275>, accessed 26 May 2017.

<sup>21</sup> 'The Disbandment of Hizbut-Tahrir Indonesia: Curbing Islamist Hardliners?'

<https://www.iseas.edu.sg/medias/commentaries/item/5399-the-disbandment-of-hizbuttahrir-indonesia-curbing-islamist-hardliners-a-commentary-by-deasy-simandjuntak>, accessed 26 May 2017

Jokowi himself faces an uphill battle for the upcoming 2019 presidential election. Politically, Ahok's defeat is a major blow for close ally Jokowi, himself a proponent of secular governance. At present, surveys show that Jokowi still enjoys high popularity and electability ratings. However, a survey by Indikator Politik found that while 73.8 percent of Jakarta voters approved of Jokowi's performance as president, only 33.4 percent were certain that they would vote for him in 2019.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, the attention that rival Prabowo Subianto has received from his successful sponsorship of Anies Baswedan's gubernatorial bid only served to boost his stature, particularly among conservative Muslim voters. Ahok's defeat should serve as a warning for Jokowi not to take his current popularity for granted.

Ahok's defeat in Jakarta shows that the grounds of Islamic politics in the Indonesian capital are shifting rapidly. The hardliners' successful politicization of the blasphemy case showed that the core of conservative Islamist factions has become better organized, funded and politically connected, thus increasing their capacity to mobilize at key elections. This political force is one to be reckoned with for the upcoming 2018 regional elections and the 2019 presidential election.

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<sup>22</sup> Marcus Mietzner & Burhanuddin Muhtadi, 'Ahok's satisfied non-voters: an anatomy', New Mandala, <http://www.newmandala.org/ahoks-satisfied-non-voters-anatomy/>, accessed 26 May 2017.