

PERSPECTIVE

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Manipulating “Diversity”: Campaign against Ahok Threatens Democracy

*Ulla Fionna**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The past decade has witnessed an increase in attacks against various minority groups in Indonesia, and the present campaign against Jakarta mayor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok) is best seen as the latest and most high-profile eruption in a long build-up.
- Paradoxically, the campaign calling for Ahok’s immediate imprisonment has taken to accusing him of being against diversity through his alleged disrespect of Islam.
- What this turn of events appears to show is that the political freedom that Indonesia has been enjoying since 1998 has not been accompanied by thorough legal, security, and education reforms.
- The need for such reforms is therefore all the stronger now. Equally important is the need to address the erosion of respect for cultural and religious diversity.

**Ulla Fionna is Fellow at ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute. She thanks Andrew Carruthers and Kathleen Azali for their comments and suggestions on this article.*

INTRODUCTION

Basuki Tjahaja Purnama – popularly known as Ahok, governor of Jakarta seeking re-election in 2017 – is currently on trial for blasphemy, accused of insulting Islam through improper use of a Qur’anic verse. As a Chinese Christian famous for delivering pragmatic material results and for brash oratory, his alleged offense has ignited strong reactions in the Muslim-majority society.

The two bodies leading the movement against him are: the FPI (Front Pembela Islam, Islam Defenders Front), a hardline group founded in 1998 famous for their morality racketeering and thuggery in promoting the implementation of Shari’ah Law and establishing a Islamic state in Indonesia, purportedly with financial and political backing from various political elite groups and military/police generals; and the MUI (Majelis Ulama Indonesia, Indonesia Ulema Council), a group of Islamic scholars whose main activity is issuing *fatwa* (rulings on points of Islamic law). The swelling of participants in their demonstrations¹ implies a growth in their ability to mobilise popular support. This also points to the weakness of Indonesia authorities in their struggle to remain neutral.

Questions need to be raised about what the movement more broadly reflects. Undeniably, among a myriad of other factors, the impending Jakarta gubernatorial election in February 2017 and its significance for the 2019 presidential elections is a major draw for power play.² Still, there is no doubt that the movement also represents a growing threat against Indonesia’s many minorities.

While others have written about the socio-political intricacies of the movement and the various elements of political Islam involved therein³ – this short analysis focuses on how the movement has re-deployed national-level discourses of “diversity” in pursuit of its cause. Using the rallies as a focal point, it argues that there has been a significant shift in the discourse on diversity in Indonesia. The piece demonstrates that the understanding of

¹ This is seen in how estimates of 100,000 participants in Defending Islam Action 2 held on 4 November 2016 growing to more than 500,000 in Defending Islam Action 3 held on 2 December’s

² While his eviction policies have certainly disillusioned Jakarta’s poor, his gubernatorial candidacy is increasingly challenged mainly by former president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono’s (SBY) son Agus Harimurti Yudhoyono, and former education minister Anies Baswedan. The position of Jakarta governor is seen as strategic for the 2019 presidential elections primarily because President Joko Widodo served as a governor before his candidacy in 2014, riding on a good track record.

³ See for example Marcus Mietzner and Devin T. Stewart, “Indonesia’s Growing Islamist Populism”, *Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs – Asia Dialogues*, 19 December 2016, (<http://www.carnegiecouncil.org/studio/multimedia/20161219/index.html>); Ken Ward, “Jakarta protests complicate Widodo re-election prospects”, *Nikkei Asian Review*, 15 December 2016, (<http://asia.nikkei.com/Viewpoints/Ken-Ward/Jakarta-protests-complicate-Widodo-re-election-prospects>); and Greg Fealy, “Bigger than Ahok: explaining the 2 December mass rally”, *Indonesia at Melbourne*, 7 December 2016, (<http://indonesiaatmelbourne.unimelb.edu.au/bigger-than-ahok-explaining-jakartas-2-december-mass-rally/>)

diversity has shifted in post-reform Indonesia to reflect an increasingly intolerant outlook that challenges Indonesia's core democratic principles, and identifies how minorities and disadvantaged groups have been steadily victimised.

BHINNEKA AND DIVERSITY

With more than 700 ethnic groups and 1,100 local languages, diversity is an everyday reality for Indonesia's people who inhabit around 13,000 islands in the world's largest archipelagic state. Although it has the world's largest Muslim population, Indonesia also hosts a rich mixture of religions and other spiritual beliefs (Catholics, assorted Protestants, Hindu, Buddhist, Confucian, and 'animists'). Despite this remarkable diversity, unifying common values through the national language, for example, has enabled Indonesians to imagine themselves being members of the same – almost improbable⁴ – nation.⁵ With deep imprints of various colonial powers, the country's founding fathers and independence leaders, who were among a very small number of indigenous individuals of the first cohort allowed Dutch education, came to understand both the strength and the challenges posed by the sheer diversity of this imagined community, and in fact marshalled diversity in their fight against colonialism and later, in their nation-building projects.

In 1928, various youth groups from different regions assembled in Jakarta to pledge their loyalty to one archipelago, one nation, one language.⁶ The Youth Pledge (Sumpah Pemuda) was the first proto-nationalist initiative that spurred and strengthened the notion of unity amongst different ethnic groups. In 1945, Sukarno declared the five principles that formed Pancasila, the ideological base of the Indonesian state: Belief in one God, Humanity, Nationalism, Consensus Democracy, and Social Prosperity.⁷ The slogan "Bhinneka Tunggal Ika" – an old Javanese term meaning Unity in Diversity, was adopted a few years after the declaration of independence in 1945. The importance of these symbols and events as markers in Indonesian nationalism further signified continuous efforts to unify Indonesians with highly diverse socio-cultural backgrounds.

Suharto further institutionalised and enforced these ideas over 32 years of authoritarian rule, with the integrated support of the nation's army and state apparatus. His administration is

⁴ See Elizabeth Pisani, *Indonesia, Etc.: Exploring the Improbable Nation*, London: Granta Books, 2014.

⁵ In his seminal 1983 work, Ben Anderson argues that "...members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members...", and "...thus all communities larger than primordial villages are imagined." (Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso, 1983, p.6)

⁶ The Dutch attendees quickly noted though, that some 'native' participants were stumbling when speaking (Malay) Indonesian.

⁷ Pancasila and the principle of unique God are written in Sanskrit. While honouring a belief in God, Pancasila prevents any religion from claiming exclusive rights of interpretation. Sukarno also refused to mention "the obligation for Muslims to respect Islamic law." which was agreed upon a few weeks earlier in the Jakarta Charter.

known for blatant repression of political dissent, and for silencing opposition for the sake of national unity and stability. Notably, he was strongly against public discussion of SARA (Suku, Agama, Ras dan Antar-golongan/ Ethnicity, Religion, Race and Intergroup relations). Such reasoning was repeatedly used to quell his political opponents.

FREEDOM VERSUS RIGHTS

The fall of Suharto's New Order in 1998 brought more political rights, more media space and broader public discourse. As a side effect of this greater freedom, however, the reform era has also seen an increase in anti-minority discourses. While reforms have been incomplete and have in fact considerably stalled,⁸ what has slowly but steadily transpired is a collision between liberal values and conservatism in public space. The increased freedom has thus exposed the profound contentions and frictions that exist between the majority and the minorities.

Post-reform governments continue to struggle with numerous instances of inter-religious clashes, most notably in Poso in 1998 (Sulawesi), the Moluccas in 1999 and Sampit in 2001 (Kalimantan). Religious minority groups have continually and increasingly been ostracised or attacked, as has been experienced by Ahmaddiyah followers, and more recently by Gafatar (Gerakan Fajar Nusantara, a sect that was declared heretical in Aceh), and Sapta Dharma traditional faith believers in Rembang (Central Java). With the frequent forced closure of churches and also some mosques, there were, according to Setara Institute 194 incidents of violent attacks on religious minorities in the first 11 months of 2015 – which was the total number for all of 2014.

Beyond religion, rising intolerance is also found in the debate around the anti-pornography bill in 2009, which sought restrictions on women's dressing and behaviour. A recurring concern among some groups was the bill's failure to take into account traditional ways of dressing among certain ethnic groups, such as those in Bali and Papua. It also 'implied that women are the primary reason of national moral decay'.⁹ Along with the proliferation of *shariah* bylaws, in 2015 alone there were 31 new discriminatory regulations, making up a total of 322 nationally thus far. Among other discriminatory regulations listed by the Human Rights Watch were the following: The armed forces now require female applicants to undergo discriminatory 'virginity tests'; the Ministry of Defense allows its male employees to take second wives if deemed necessary while female personnel are banned from polygamy; and the petition to increase the minimum age of marriage for girls from 16 to 18 was rejected.¹⁰

⁸ For details, see for example Marcus Mietzner, "Indonesia's democratic stagnation: anti-reformist elites and resilient civil society", *Democratization*, Volume 19, 2012, Issue 2.

⁹ For details, please see Pam Allen, "Challenging Diversity?: Indonesia's Anti-Pornography Bill", *Asian Studies Review*, June 2007, Vol. 31, pp. 101-115.

¹⁰ World Report 2016: Indonesia, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2016/country-chapters/indonesia>, accessed 15 December 2016.

Another group that has consistently and increasingly become a target is the LGBT community. Recently, this group has received an onslaught of attacks from government officials, despite the fact that homosexuality has never been illegal in Indonesia. Most notably, petitioners are advocating that the Constitutional Court criminalise homosexuality. In November 2016, raids have been launched against alleged “gay parties,” and recently a training session about the LGBT community’s legal rights was shut down.

DIVERGING FROM DIVERSITY

With these recent issues in mind, it is clear that the case against Ahok is a continuation of an persistence trend in intolerance. Be that as it may, the campaign against him has shown several more worrying new trends.

Firstly, the manner in which the concept of diversity has been used by both Ahok’s detractors and supporters warrants special attention. The pro-Ahok camp claims that the campaign against him is a sign of a lack of tolerance towards diversity. At the same time, those opposing him has also strategically used the concept of diversity in accusing him of disrespecting Islam and blaspheming against the religion. They accuse him of using religion and race in attacking the Quran and Islam and in doing so, he is not respecting the nation’s diversity.¹¹ As such, while the majority is traditionally expected to extend acceptance of diversity, it is now the minority that is required to do so.¹²

Leaving aside the ongoing theological and teleological debate about whether Ahok has indeed blasphemed against Islam, this strategic redeployment of “diversity” by Ahok’s detractors suggests that the meaning of “diversity” in contemporary Indonesia has shifted, entailing a less accepting and tolerant outlook. Worryingly, the campaign has gone on despite the case being rushed for trial. Furthermore, the demand for Ahok’s immediate imprisonment also reflects poor understanding and even denial of the legal system.¹³

Secondly, like the case of Brexit and the US presidential election, this case demonstrates the ease with which information technology and media in Indonesia can mobilise the public through appeals to sensitive emotional issues. The credibility of information dissemination seems a small issue. A survey found that 88.5 percent of the public is unable to pinpoint

¹¹ See for example “Yang Main Isu SARA Justru Ahok, Seperti Maling Teriak Maling!”, *fajar.co.id*, 7 October 2016, <http://fajar.co.id/2016/10/07/yang-main-isu-sara-justru-ahok-seperti-maling-teriak-maling/>, accessed 20 January 2017.

¹² It should be noted here that at least some in the anti-Ahok movement feel that a non-Muslim should not be a leader in Indonesia.

¹³ Legal grounds against his arrest include the following: there is no risk of him fleeing, low risk of evidence to be missing (the viral video that is at the centre of this controversy is unlikely to disappear), and he is unlikely to reoffend.

what it was that Ahok had said that violated Islam.¹⁴ Many did in fact decide to join the campaign hastily, completely trusting their sources of information, and disregarding details and other considerations.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

On many occasions, Indonesia's state apparatus has either been half-hearted, reluctant or even partial in safeguarding minorities.¹⁵ With the strong momentum against diversity reflected in the anti-Ahok campaign, the state will need to review its efforts in ensuring the safety of all its citizens and in being consistent in its responsibility to minorities. The fact that President Jokowi appeared on stage with the coordinator of the movement has given some legitimacy to the otherwise often ridiculed radical group.¹⁶ While this may have been an attempt by the President to appropriate the movement before it spiralled out of control, it is imperative that the Jokowi government takes more definite action than initiate a task force for intolerance.¹⁷

Beyond issues of law enforcement, the growing intolerance in Indonesia presents greater challenges. Whether it is indeed hard-line and ultra-conservative groups who are behind the movement, the strong appeal of intolerance is disturbing.

What is most alarming is the movement's massively concerted effort to assume the right to define diversity and intolerance, and to determine "who" counts as diverse and "what" counts as intolerant. The campaign also marked the promotion of racial and religious issues for political gains, as well as the rise in influence of hardline groups and in their encroachment towards mainstream politics.

At the same time, the more mainstream Muslim organisations, such as the Nahdlatul Ulama, are increasingly struggling to promote greater acceptance and understanding in Indonesian society.

¹⁴ "Survei: 88,5 Persen Masyarakat Tak Tahu Persis Ucapan Ahok yang Dianggap Menista Agama", *Kompas*, 8 December 2016, <http://nasional.kompas.com/read/2016/12/08/17585931/survei.88.5.persen.masyarakat.tak.tahu.persis.ucapan.ahok.yang.dianggap.menista.agama>, accessed 14 December 2016.

¹⁵ The incident of a radical group raiding a Christmas celebration in Bandung in the presence of security forces serves as another indication of the state's reforms failing. A Christian university in Yogyakarta was also forced to change their advertisement that included a student wearing hijab. Muslim hardliner groups have been objecting to the donning of Christmas paraphernalia during the 2016 festive period. At the same time, there have been signs that the police are stepping up efforts to safeguard the minorities.

¹⁶ The Islam Defenders Front (Front Pembela Islam, FPI) is generally known to be a group of conservative Muslims generally seen as a "public nuisance and vigilante group on "morality" for two decades". See Fealy and Ward, *op cit*.

¹⁷ "Gov't to Form Task Force for Guarding Tolerance", Sekretariat Kabinet Republik Indonesia, 10 December 2016, (<http://setkab.go.id/en/govt-to-form-task-force-for-guarding-tolerance/>), accessed 6 January 2017.

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