

PERSPECTIVE

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The Jakarta Election Continues: What Next for Embattled Governor Ahok?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Although incumbent Governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok) won the first round of the Jakarta gubernatorial election on 15 February 2017, by securing only 43 per cent of the votes, he fell short of the 50 percent threshold needed for an outright victory.
- Ahok and running mate Djarot Saiful Hidayat will therefore have to go head-to-head against Anies Baswedan and running mate Sandiaga Uno in a run-off election scheduled for April 19.
- The election results do show that the blasphemy charge against ethnic Chinese and Christian Ahok has impacted his campaign negatively, with many Jakartans becoming reluctant to vote for him despite his consistent performance satisfaction rating of over 70 percent.
- The second round will be a much tougher race. With more at stake in an increasingly polarized political landscape, race and religious campaigning is likely to continue.
- The Jakarta election is a precursor to how race and religion may play a role in the upcoming 2019 presidential election.

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RESULTS OF THE FIRST ROUND

The embattled ethnic Chinese and Christian incumbent governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (popularly known as Ahok) won the Jakarta gubernatorial election held on Wednesday, 15 February 2017.

However, in winning only 43% of the votes, Ahok and running mate Djarot Saiful Hidayat fell short of the 50 percent threshold required for an outright victory. This means that there will be a second election, a run-off that is scheduled for 19 April 2017. The pair will go head-to-head against former education minister Anies Baswedan and running mate businessman Sandiaga Uno, who were a close second with 40 percent of the votes.

The third pair, former President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's (SBY) son Agus Harimurti Yudhoyono and his bureaucrat running mate Sylviana Murni are out after coming last and gaining less than 18 percent of the votes. This is a big blow for the elder Mr Yudhoyono who had invested a significant amount of resources and political clout in his son Agus, who quit his promising military career to run in the Jakarta gubernatorial race.¹

This first round election was preceded by months of controversy and civil unrest following allegations of blasphemy against Ahok for insulting The Quran. Since late October 2016, Jakarta has seen three mass Islamic protests after an edited video of typically straight-talking Ahok telling a small crowd in Jakarta's Thousand Islands Regency not to be 'fooled' by those who use Al Ma'idah verse 51 of The Quran to claim that it is a sin for Muslims to vote for a non-Muslim leader, went viral on Indonesian social media.

Before the blasphemy allegation, Ahok's electability rating was at over 50 percent, indicating that a first-round victory was not only possible, but likely. However, in the few weeks after the video went viral, his ratings took a dramatic fall to below 25 percent at its worst in November 2016. Although his electability slowly recovered in the following two months,² it never really recovered.³

While his opponents in the election never directly condemned Ahok for blasphemy, they certainly benefitted from the conservative Islamist sentiments. Throughout the campaign, both Mr Baswedan and Mr Yudhoyono emphasized their Muslim identities and made shows of Islamic piety to appeal to Muslim voters.

¹ 'SBY Helps Vault Son into Lead in Jakarta Race', <http://www.todayonline.com/world/asia/sby-helps-vault-son-lead-jakarta-race>, accessed 21 February 2017.

² Ahok's electability suffered a slight decrease after his trial defence team alleged that the Head of the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI) and Nadhlatul Ulama (NU) elder Ma'ruf Amin had a phone conversation with Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono about potentially issuing a fatwa against Ahok's blasphemy. Mr Amin denied the allegations and, after public outrage by NU supporters, Ahok apologized. His popularity ratings have since recovered.

³ 'Ahok-Djarot Team Leads New Jakarta Polls', <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2017/01/30/ahok-djarot-team-leads-new-jakarta-polls.html>, accessed 22 February 2017.

Mr Baswedan even went so far as to meet with the FPI in a move that shocked those who had seen him as a moderate Muslim politician. Considering that the FPI is widely viewed as a vigilante group that in the past had posed as an Islamic ‘police’ against vices and had engaged in violent extra-judicial raids on nightclubs and bars among others, Mr Baswedan’s nod towards the unlawful group must be seen as a dangerous gesture by a politician who could potentially be Jakarta’s next governor.

In addition, throughout the campaign, Ahok had also been attacked for his Chinese ethnicity. While this had happened before, the intensity of fake news and anti-Chinese hate-speech this time around were alarming.

Many of the hoaxes alleged Chinese (both in terms of PRC and Chinese Indonesian) economic and political conspiracies, not only behind Ahok, but also close ally President Joko Widodo (Jokowi), himself no stranger to anti-Chinese smear campaigns.⁴ For instance, fake news circulated anonymously on social media claimed that Ahok’s free HPV (Human Papillomavirus) vaccine programme could make girls infertile, and was therefore part of a greater Chinese conspiracy to diminish the native Indonesian population. Others alleged that both Jokowi and Ahok were actually agents of communist China.⁵

It is important to note that the circulation of these anti-Chinese materials have worried many Chinese Indonesians, a community that had been traumatized by past anti-Chinese attacks. While the vast majority of Jakarta’s ethnic Chinese supports Ahok,⁶ a number of Chinese Indonesians expressed concern to this author during fieldwork that Ahok had stirred up too much unwanted attention towards the Chinese. For instance, an ethnic Chinese political analyst remarked that while it was important that the Chinese had strong political representation, a controversial and combative figure like Ahok was not necessarily good for the Chinese Indonesians. A fear here is that Ahok’s often impolite behavior could perpetuate stereotypes of the Chinese as brash and disrespectful towards the *pribumi*.⁷

⁴ There were FPI-led anti-Chinese protests against Ahok in 2012 when he was Jokowi’s running mate for the Jakarta gubernatorial race. The main focus then was not on him though. Jokowi himself was the subject of an anti-Chinese smear campaign during the 2014 presidential race when it was rumored that he was of Chinese descent. Throughout his tenure as President, Jokowi has also received criticism for being ‘too close’ to China. For more on this topic, see Charlotte Setijadi, ‘Ethnic Chinese in Contemporary Indonesia: Changing Identity Politics and the Paradox of Sinification’, ISEAS Perspective, 2016, No. 12 (https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS_Perspective_2016_12.pdf).

⁵ ‘Where Memes Could Kill: Indonesia’s Worsening Problem of Fake News’, <http://time.com/4620419/indonesia-fake-news-ahok-chinese-christian-islam/>, accessed 22 February 2017.

⁶ Indikator Politik’s survey on ‘Dinamika Elektoral Jelang Pilkada DKI Jakarta, 2-8 Februari 2017’ (‘Electoral Dynamics in the Lead-Up to the DKI Jakarta Regional Election, 2-8 February 2017’), reveals that 86 percent of all Chinese surveyed said they supported Ahok-Djarot.

⁷ Personal conversation conducted on 15 February 2017.

A MORE POLARIZED JAKARTA?

Evidently, Ahok's opponents' strategy of amplifying and politicizing the blasphemy allegation worked. They managed to capitalize on already existing religious and anti-Chinese sentiments, as well as the recent trend towards rising intolerance against minorities in Indonesia.⁸

In many ways, Jakarta has become a much more polarized place in the midst of Ahok's blasphemy allegation, with opinions divided on whether a non-Muslim should be able to lead a Muslim-majority society.

Arguably, the most successful and dangerous aspect of the anti-Ahok campaign has been the reductionist and divisive rhetoric: that a vote for Ahok is a vote against Islamic principles.

Under this religious banner, Islamist hardliners like the FPI have been able to rally grievances and give voice to those who suffered under Ahok's policies, such as among those forcibly evicted from Jakarta's slum areas. Such rhetoric also disguises the fact that Indonesian Islam is very diverse, and that there are many Muslim Jakartans who vehemently support Ahok.

Similarly, since Ahok is an ethnic Chinese with alleged ties to rich Chinese business tycoons,⁹ a vote for Ahok is purported to be a vote for Chinese (and therefore 'foreign' or non-native) influences in the Indonesian economy and politics. This was certainly a message exploited by Anies-Sandi backer Prabowo Subianto who in his populist and ultra-nationalist endorsement video urged Jakartans to vote for a candidate pair that would return 'the Indonesian nation's wealth back to the people of Indonesia.'¹⁰

Ahok's supporters were quick to come to his defence under the banners of tolerance, pluralism, and progressive politics. The two opposing groups hurled insults at each other in

⁸ For more on this topic, see Ulla Fionna, 'Manipulating "Diversity": Campaign against Ahok Threatens Democracy', ISEAS Perspective, 2017, No. 6

(https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS_Perspective_2017_6.pdf)

⁹ Ahok came under fire in the first half of 2016 for allegedly giving preferential treatment towards ethnic Chinese property tycoons such as Agung Sedayu Group owner Sugianto Kusuma (known as Aguan) for development contracts for the controversial Jakarta Cove land reclamation project. Although Ahok has not been made suspect of any wrongdoing, the case fueled rumors that Ahok acts in the interest of wealthy ethnic Chinese backers. For more on this topic, see 'Middlemen and the Jakarta Bay Reclamation Scandal',

<https://en.tempo.co/read/news/2016/10/07/314810458/Middlemen-and-the-Jakarta-Bay-Reclamation-Scandal>, accessed 22 February 2017.

¹⁰ 'Dukungan Prabowo Subianto', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UobDp32v30Q>, accessed 22 February 2017.

public and on social media, giving the impression that the Jakarta gubernatorial election had become a fight between religious intolerance and pluralism, and between conservatism and progress.

However, it would be far too simplistic to say that the Jakarta electorate was divided over issues of religion and race alone. Even before the election, various polls suggested that many Jakartans opposed Ahok's slum evictions and land reclamation project, and indeed, voters in affected areas such as the slum-evicted community Luar Batang in North Jakarta overwhelmingly voted for Anies Baswedan or, to a lesser extent, for Agus Yudhoyono.¹¹

This is not to mention voters who simply do not like Ahok's personality and brash mannerisms. Pre-election polls revealed that while surveyed voters liked Ahok for his policies and work ethic, they did not find him to be a polite or personable candidate. Anies Baswedan, on the other hand, scored highly in these categories.¹² Considering that Jakarta voters place high importance on the likeability and politeness of the candidates, Ahok's brazenness put many off from voting for him. It is important to note that a major reason why Ahok's electability ratings went up earlier this year was because he refrained from public displays of brashness, and showed humility in apologizing after the blasphemy allegation.¹³

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE 2019 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

Having said that, it cannot be denied that the political and societal commotion surrounding the Jakarta election has revealed the deep rifts that exist in society, as well as the shifting ground of Islamist politics in Indonesia. These have important implications for national politics and the 2019 presidential election.

For one, an Ahok defeat will be a major blow for Jokowi and his PDI-P party. Not having Ahok as ally at the leadership of the capital city would weaken the President's hold on power. This is particularly true in the context of the struggle for dominance between elite players Jokowi-Megawati, Prabowo Subianto, and SBY.

Now that SBY, at least for the time being, is largely out of the picture with Agus' defeat, the competition intensifies between presidential hopeful Prabowo and incumbent Jokowi.

¹¹ 'Anies-Sandi Menang di Kampung Luar Batang', <http://megapolitan.kompas.com/read/2017/02/15/20504991/anies-sandi.menang.di.kampung.luar.batang>, accessed 22 February 2017.

¹² Indikator Politik survey on 'Dinamika Elektoral Jelang Pilkada DKI Jakarta, 2-8 Februari 2017' ('Electoral Dynamics in the Lead-Up to the DKI Jakarta Regional Election, 2-8 February 2017'), released 10 February 2017.

¹³ 'Elektabilitas Tiga Calon Gubernur DKI Jakarta Naik', <https://pilkada.tempo.co/read/news/2016/12/14/348827908/elektabilitas-tiga-calon-gubernur-dki-jakarta-naik>, accessed 3 March 2017

An Anies Baswedan victory would strengthen backer Prabowo's sphere of influence in the capital, which could be harmful for Jokowi in the lead-up to 2019. Megawati clearly understands the importance of Jakarta as a battleground, with a PDI-P MP telling this author that Megawati has instructed all PDI-P cadres to concentrate their efforts on winning the Jakarta election.¹⁴

Furthermore, attacks against Ahok must also be understood as a concerted push against a more progressive style of leadership (represented by Jokowi nationally and Ahok in Jakarta) that emphasizes secularism, good governance, and transparency. This style of reform has caused unease among groups that previously had easy access to resources from dubious patron-client relationships.

More importantly, what recent events in Jakarta tell us is that the Islamist landscape is changing. Hardliner groups like the FPI are using the momentum against progressive politics to drive Indonesia's political Islam away from the moderate and mostly pluralist branches of Islam represented by groups such as Nadhlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah. Slowly overtaken by conservative factions like the Indonesian Council of Ulamas (MUI) and FPI, NU and Muhammadiyah no longer dominate the agenda for the mobilization of Muslims. This will be something that not only Jakarta politicians have to contend with, but something that contenders for the 2019 presidential election will have to take into serious account.

If Anies Baswedan wins in Jakarta, it would partly be because he has successfully appealed to conservative Islamist factions and implicitly aligned himself with hardline groups. This is a very risky play. In the future, both Anies and Prabowo may be pressured to sway to the demands of hardline Islamists in pushing back against religious minorities and secularist establishments. This in turn could change the character of the Islamic public sphere in Indonesia. Prabowo and his coalition probably think that they can control the hardliners, but the surge would be very hard to stop or manage once the floodgates are opened.

Ultimately, an Ahok defeat would show that his (and Jokowi's) opponents' strategy of using race and religious issues as a political tool to delegitimize the current leadership has worked. This would set a dangerous precedent, not just for the 2019 presidential election, but also for the future of Indonesian plural society more generally. Jokowi will need to take a much stronger stance against Islamist hardliners and engage in both public and backstage power play if he is to push them back to the fringes of national politics.

THE SECOND ROUND

Now that there is more at stake with just two contenders in the second round, we can expect continuing religious and racial campaigning. Furthermore, the ongoing blasphemy trial will continue to cast a shadow over Ahok's political future.

¹⁴ Personal communication conducted on 12 January 2017.

The question now is whom Agus Yudhoyono's voters will back in the second round. Shortly after the election, a senior official within PDI-P and Ahok's campaign team admitted that it would be very difficult to convince Islamic parties that previously supported Agus Yudhoyono (PPP and PKB) to now support Ahok.¹⁵ On 9 March, SBY met with President Jokowi in the State Palace in a meeting designed to maintain good relations and clear up any 'miscommunication'.¹⁶ Undoubtedly this is part of the PDI-P coalition's attempt to court SBY and the Democrats' support in Jakarta. However, SBY is also scheduled to meet with Prabowo in the near future to discuss a possible collaboration.¹⁷

In terms of voters, assuming that the majority of Agus' 18 per cent came from Muslim voters who had refused to vote for Ahok, these votes would presumably go to Anies Baswedan as the other Muslim candidate. On the other hand, it is also a possibility that moderate Muslims who had voted for Agus because they felt offended by Ahok's comments would rather vote for Ahok in the second round than align themselves with hardline Islamists in Anies' camp.

Indeed, it is not all bad news for Ahok. The very fact that he was able to bounce back and secure a first-round victory despite the blasphemy case and concerted political attacks show that many Jakartans were able to see past race and religion when voting.

Furthermore, post-election data show that over 1.6 million of the first-round votes were invalid, the majority of which were likely cast by voters who purposefully forfeited their votes because they did not like any of the three candidates. This number is larger than the total votes received by Agus Yudhoyono.¹⁸ This means that there is a big opportunity here for both the remaining candidate pairs to appeal to undecided or disenchanting voters they failed to persuade in the first round.

At the time of writing, Jakarta is recovering from the worst flooding it has seen since Ahok took office in 2014. The floods could certainly be seen as a stroke of bad luck, since a flood-free Jakarta was one of Ahok's selling points in first-round campaigning. However, Ahok could also turn the narrative around by pointing out that the flooding could have been worse had it not been for his tough eviction and clean-up policies. The flooding problem could be a way for Ahok's camp to bring attention back to policy issues rather than on his blasphemy trial.

¹⁵ Interview conducted on 16 February 2017.

¹⁶ 'Bertemu Jokowi, SBY berseloroh, 'presiden itu hidupnya tidak tenang', <http://www.bbc.com/indonesia/indonesia-39215185>, accessed 9 March 2017.

¹⁷ 'I will definitely meet SBY: Prabowo', <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2017/03/03/i-will-definitely-meet-sby-prabowo.html>, accessed 9 March 2017.

¹⁸ 'Suara Golput Pilkada DKI Lebih Besar Dibanding Pendukung Agus', <http://www.cnnindonesia.com/kursipanasdki1/20170218153005-516-194428/suara-golput-pilkada-dki-lebih-besar-dibanding-pendukung-agus/>, accessed 23 February 2017.

In any case, the upcoming run-off election will be a test of just how mature and open-minded Jakartan voters really are. With at least one recent poll showing that Ahok-Djarot are trailing behind Anies-Sandi,¹⁹ the successful candidate pair will be the one who can sway moderate Muslims and convince Jakarta's many undecided voters.

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¹⁹ 'Survei LSI Denny JA: Anies-Sandi Kemungkinan Unggul pada Putaran Kedua', <http://megapolitan.kompas.com/read/2017/03/07/16100441/survei.lsi.denny.ja.anies-sandi.kemungkinan.unggul.pada.putaran.kedua>, accessed 9 March 2017.