

Indonesia, Jakarta election, political Islam: Challenger Anies accused of courting Islamic vote amid religious divide

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Christian governor Ahok used to enjoy a 70% approval rating but then came his blasphemy trial for allegedly insulting Islam. Now the vote is too close to call

It was in 2004, as a PhD student in political science at Northern Illinois University, that Anies Baswedan would ponder the future interplay between Islam and Indonesia.

In his paper, “political Islam in Indonesia, present and future trajectory”, Baswedan pointed out that, “fertile ground exists for Islam-friendly political parties to attract considerable support from ‘Muslim’ voters.” Muslim voters, he explains in the footnotes, referred to devout and practising adherents of the faith.

More than a decade on, Baswedan is campaigning to become Jakarta’s next governor and seems to have wholeheartedly taken his own advice. Analysts say he has overtly courted the Muslim vote in the tight race against the ethnic Chinese Christian incumbent, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, better known as “Ahok”.

On Wednesday, more than 7 million Jakartans will head to the polls in one of the most contested elections to date, marked by several massive, Islamic-inspired anti-Ahok rallies late last year, and an ongoing controversial blasphemy trial.

Neither Ahok nor Baswedan, a former education minister, won an outright majority in the first round vote this February when Agus Yudhoyono, the son of former president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, was knocked out.

Days out from the second and final round, Baswedan is just one point ahead, according to a survey by Saiful Manjuni Research and Consulting (SMRC) released on 12 April. But before Ahok became engulfed in the blasphemy trial for allegedly insulting Islam, the picture looked very different – the incumbent had an approval rating of more than 70%.

The religion card

The only way to beat him, analysts say, would be to play the religion card and appeal to the Islamic base.

Aleksius Jemadu, dean of political sciences at Pelita Harapan University, says: “We cannot underestimate the effect of using religion, the last instrument they could use in order to win the election considering the fact that quite a number of people in Jakarta are conservative Muslims.”

“So it is a source of strength for Anies [Baswedan] to capitalise on that issue,” he adds, “on religious sentiment.”

Baswedan, a former rector of Paramadina University, was seen as a religious moderate before, the type to write an editorial in defence of religious tolerance.

But as the Jakarta governor race has tightened Baswedan’s public image has morphed, argues Hendro Prasteyo, a professor of political sociology at Indonesia’s State Islamic University.

“From the beginning of November until now you can see how Anies always uses religious gestures. For example, he always wear the black peci, the black cap,” says Prasetyo, of the hat often worn by Muslim men.

“He is going to mosques, and then preaching in the mosque and he also shows his closeness to radical groups like the FPI [the Islamic Defenders Front]. The point is to show he is close to Muslims, and he represents Muslims,” notes Prasetyo, “He has had huge success by using religious symbols, which is contradictory to what he was before.”

Baswedan, agrees Jemadu, is less statesman, more politician these days.

“I don’t think that you can categorise him [Baswedan] as a man of principle,” says professor Jemadu, “He is quite pragmatic. Whatever benefits him he will take it, from one camp to another camp changing his principles, his values, all the way.”

Amid the blasphemy proceedings, the sometimes-brash Ahok has kept a lower than normal profile, opting for slick social media coverage and largely refusing interviews.

‘Anies is against Ahok, and Ahok is Christian’

The ethnic Chinese Christian governor understands the importance of religious symbols, too. Three days before the vote he is scheduled to inaugurate a new government-funded mosque in West Jakarta, with the president, Joko Widodo, by his side.

The use of religious symbols is nothing new in Indonesian politics, but the differences, ethnic and religious, have perhaps never been so stark, or as sensitive.

In neighbourhoods across the capital the idea that Muslims must choose Muslim leaders has spread over recent months, propagated in anti-Ahok pamphlets and banners strung up at local mosques, which threaten to deny funeral rights to Muslims who vote for Ahok.

More than 1,000 such discriminatory banners have been pulled down so far, an Ahok spokesperson told the Guardian. Baswedan has also condemned them – saying that if mosques refused an Ahok voter he would perform the burial rites himself.

But in the capital of the world’s largest Muslim-majority nation, the messaging has been effective. According to the SMRC survey, the main reason voters are choosing Baswedan is because they share the same religion.

“It’s ideology,” explains Prasetyo, “Most people don’t have sufficient information about Anies so what they see is Anies is against Ahok, and Ahok is Christian and Chinese, that’s it. That’s a very simplified way of understanding, and that’s enough. It shows how religion in Indonesia is still very, very important, and it’s dangerous,” he says.

Baswedan has denied pandering to Islamists, arguing the media has unfairly framed him meeting with the hardliners. His spokesman, Pandji Pragiwaksono, points out that Baswedan has repeatedly said religion should not be used as a weapon, and that he has in fact met various groups, because he wants to unify the city.

It is not Baswedan who has changed, he says, but the mood in the capital. "It is not about him changing his stance or who he is, it is the situation that has shifted and people are reacting to the situation by showing support for Anies," he says.

"What has changed is that we have a contender in the Jakarta governor election race who is Christian," he says, "That is new and that kind of ignites the hardliners."

Kate Lamb in Jakarta

* "Jakarta election challenger Anies accused of courting Islamic vote amid religious divide". The Guardian. Saturday 15 April 2017 01.22 BST Last modified on Saturday 15 April 2017 01.23 BST: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/15/jakarta-election-challenger-anies-accused-of-courting-islamic-vote-amid-religious-divide>

Jakarta governor election a 'litmus test' of Indonesian Islam

Incumbent Ahok, a Christian from the ethnic Chinese minority, fights to retain office after a campaign charged with racial and religious intolerance.

Millions of Jakarta residents will go to the polls on Wednesday in a vote that is being seen as a "litmus test" of Indonesian Islam.

In the capital of the world's largest Muslim-majority nation, the incumbent Jakarta governor Basuki Purnama Tjahaja, better known as Ahok, is battling to retain his seat.

Ahok, a Christian from the country's ethnic Chinese minority, is clinging to a slight lead in the polls against Anies Baswedan, the former education minister, and Agus Harimurti Yudhoyono, son of a former president.

Ahok was favourite to win the vote until he became embroiled in a blasphemy scandal. Accused of insulting Islam, he has been forced to defend what many believe are politically motivated charges.

Mass protests by religious hardliners and the legal proceedings that followed have led some observers to view Wednesday's election as a test of Indonesia's much-touted commitment to pluralism.

"I think this is going to be a litmus test of Indonesian Islam," said Tobias Basuki, a researcher at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. "Are we tolerant or intolerant?"

The blasphemy case against Ahok came about following immense public pressure from demonstrations organised at the behest of hardline Islamists.

Rumours abound that powerful political interests helped fund and mobilise the protests to chip away

at Ahok's strong popularity.

Jakarta governor Ahok's blasphemy trial

"You cannot underestimate the effect, the significance of this primordialism and the politicisation of religion in order to achieve political ends [by] those who use religion to win the election," Aleksius Jemadu, dean of political science at Jakarta's Pelita Harapan University, told the Guardian.

The effect has been decidedly damaging for Ahok, a straight-talking sometimes brash leader credited with delivering positive changes in the city including mitigating floods, cutting red tape and driving infrastructure projects.

Ahok's lead has been steadily eroded and at times eclipsed by his contenders. His poll standing has rebounded in recent weeks but remains tenuous.

A poll in December 2016 showed how effectively a conservative religious base had been galvanised against him.

Saiful Manjani Research and Consulting (SMRC) found that 45% of Indonesians believed the remarks at the centre of Ahok's troubles were blasphemous but 88% admitted they weren't exactly sure what he had said.

Ahok's electoral rivals have aggressively courted the Islamic vote – visiting mosques and religious leaders, donning Muslim garb and, in the case of Anies Baswedan, a former education minister, even controversially meeting the head of a hardline Islamic group.

"I think the most critical issue is the unstoppable politicisation – How strong the motivation and aim of Ahok's enemies is to prevent him from winning by capitalising on this issue of insulting religion," noted Jemadu of the dynamics at play.

At a time when the country is grappling with the relationship between religion and state, the blowback has also churned up underlying resentment against Indonesia's often wealthier Chinese ethnic minority.

Racist, anti-Chinese memes have been circulated online – some even branding Ahok a communist, a damning insult in Indonesia.

One reason the Jakarta governorship is so hotly contested is the potential bearing it is perceived to have on the presidency.

The current president, Joko Widodo, was held the post before being elected head of state in 2014 which catapulted his then deputy, Ahok, into the governorship.

At time of writing Ahok stands at around 39% in the polls. Without receiving the more than 50% needed to win on Wednesday, he would have to fight out a second round where his chances could be significantly worse.

"If it goes to a second round," Basuki says, "it will be very ugly."

Kate Lamb in Jakarta

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<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/feb/14/jakarta-governor-election-a-litmus-test-of-indonesian-islam>
