

Ahok's defeats and public debate in Indonesia



Basuki Thahaja Purnama's ('Ahok') electoral defeat in Jakarta's gubernatorial election on 19 April was stunning in itself. And then Jakarta's sitting governor was dealt a further blow on 9 May when he was convicted to a two year jail sentence for blasphemy. Both events are a setback for those campaigning for a tolerant and pluralist Indonesia. As the election campaign focused on Ahok's Chinese-Christian background and the purported threat he posed to Islam, the election results and the subsequent court ruling suggest that the appeal and the power of hardliner Islamic organisations is growing.

So far the interpretations of these events have focused on the considerations of Indonesian voters. Some attributed Ahok's electoral victory to a [growing concern about social inequality](#), pointing to his [low vote-share among poor Jakartans](#). Others focused on the [impact that religious identity has](#) on voting behaviour. Compared to other groups, Muslims were much less likely to vote for Ahok. These views suggest that a [complex interplay of class and religion](#) brought about Ahok's defeat.

These analyses all focus on the considerations that individual voters may have. But at least as significant is what Ahok's defeat says about the character of public debate in Indonesia. The Jakarta elections and Ahok's conviction throw up a number of puzzles that suggest that we need to take a closer look at how public opinion is shaped, and by whom. The nature of Ahok's defeat raises concerns about the increasingly closed character of Indonesia's public sphere, and points to the importance of informal, personal networks in spreading and legitimising ideas.

Who believes what?

Less than a year ago it seemed a near-foregone conclusion that Ahok would win the elections. With high approval ratings and an image as a relatively effective and clean administrator, it seemed unlikely that he would lose to his main adversary Anies Baswedan, an academic and not particularly popular ex-minister in Jokowi's cabinet. But then came that campaign speech at Thousand Islands in October last year. He said, almost in passing, that his adversaries 'are fooling people by using Al Maidah 51', a Koranic verse that warns Muslims against having a non-Muslim as an ally. Nobody took any notice at the time. That changed when a doctored version of the speech was posted on Youtube. Islamic organisations cried wolf, insisting that with his reference to a Koranic verse Ahok had insulted Islam and committed blasphemy. This [made political sense](#): Ahok's adversaries had long tried to use Ahok's Chinese-Christian background to brand him as being anti-Muslim. The surprise, however, was that the blasphemy accusation struck root: during several mass-demonstrations hundreds of thousands Muslims took the streets to protest against the perceived 'insult to Islam'. In a poll taken right after the elections, [73.5 percent stated](#) that they believed Ahok to be guilty of blasphemy.

Ahok's adversaries were just as persuasive in convincing people that good Muslims should not vote for a Christian. They used a questionable interpretation of the Koranic verse Ahok referred to, Al Maidah 51. This verse is commonly understood to mean that 'those who believe, do not take Jews and Christians [as allies](#)'. Yet the phrase was reinterpreted to mean that Muslims are not allowed to vote for a non-Muslim. Again this interpretation gained traction: while 67 percent were satisfied with Ahok performance, only 42 percent voted for him. This suggests that a sizable portion of voters felt that, while liking him, they could not vote for Ahok.

Both these interpretations are not obvious. Whatever the impressionable judge ruled last week, it is far from obvious that Ahok committed blasphemy. As a host of experts and even [members of Indonesia's Ulema council MUI](#) pointed out in court, Ahok's remark about Al-Maidah does not contain an insult to Islam. Similarly it is far from obvious that the Quran tells Muslims not to vote for non-Muslims. This requires quite an uncommon interpretation of Koranic verses. In fact a host of experts and opinion makers argued in both newspapers and on TV against these interpretations. So why did so many people come to believe these things? What made these interpretations seem legitimate and convincing?

Public debates are social

Public opinions are a product of social interaction. The opinions that people hold is not only the result of individual reasoning, but also a product of the networks in which people live their life, and their considerations about who should be listened to. A focus on this social nature of public debate can provide an alternative explanation for the success of the anti-Ahok campaign.

Social media played a role. In this sense Jakarta's elections reflect an international trend. In a manner reminiscent of the American elections or the Brexit campaign, the Jakarta election highlight increased importance of social media as a source of (fake) information. The character of social media prevents people to getting confronted with views and information that challenges their perceived opinions. As people stay within their own bubble, individuals have less opportunity to scrutinise their opinions. Given the frenzied debates on Facebook and the intense messaging through Whatsapp and Telegram during the Jakarta elections, such dynamics might well have played a role: when you keep reading about Ahok blasphemous conduct, you become more inclined to agree.

These social media interactions intersected with neighbourhood-level dynamics. Local social networks also played an important role in shaping public opinion. I would suggest the following two dynamics were particularly important. First, changes in local patterns of authority are working to the advantage of Islamic organisations. In these elections religious leaders flexed their muscle. Voters were regularly told during Friday prayer that Ahok posed a threat to Islam, and that dire consequences awaited if they did not vote for a Muslim candidate. As, for example, [one of Marcus Mietzner's informants remarked](#), 'My heart was for Ahok. He was good for us small people. (...) There was a lot of assistance from the government for us. But I couldn't vote for him. In the mosque, they told me my body wouldn't be prayed for after my death if I voted for Ahok'. This influence of the local imam over voting behaviour partly reflects the growing standing of Islam in general. But it also highlights the organisational advantage that religious organisations have: with their local presence mosques provide an exceptionally good network to spread opinions.

While mosques are shaping public opinion, the capacity of other local authorities to spread alternative views has been weakening. During the New Order local state representatives, like the village head or the neighbourhood (RT/RW) heads would likely have countered such political use of religious divisions. Supported by the state's oppressive apparatus and a capacity to help people gain access to various benefits from the New Order state, these authorities were highly influential in their communities. People looked at village heads as source of information about the outside world, as well as for hints about what political opinions were considered acceptable and permissible. In fact, during the New Order local state authorities had a certain capacity to make the local Imam toe the line of the regime. Invoking and emphasising religious divisions were not permissible. Indonesia's democratisation process has [reduced the capacity of local state authorities to shape public opinion](#). While this is a positive trend in many ways, the declining powers of village heads and neighbourhood leaders has left the field open for religious leaders in the mosque.

Dependencies matter

A second aspect of the socialised character of public debate is that social and economic dependencies matter. A purely personal opinion is a luxury few can afford. The formation and expression of opinions is shaped by the need to avoid upsetting important social relations. For this reason the organisation of economic and social life influences public debate. An example is the dominance of organisations like *Front Pembela Islam* or *Front Pembela Rempug*, vigilante groups that played an [important role in mobilising people against Ahok](#). Their capacity to bring people out into the street does not just stem from the popularity of their views but also from their integration into neighbourhood life. These organisations provide important sources of livelihood. Their members manage car parking and public markets, extort local businesses and manage charity drives. These organisations also help solve disputes and, due to their political clout, help residents convey their wishes to politicians and bureaucrats. This local presence generates support for their ideas, while discouraging people from voicing their opposition. This discouragement is not always very subtle: in some neighbourhoods the thuggish members of these organisations can freely intimidate those disagree with them, doing so under the convenient banner of ‘defending Islam’.

This is a basic material logic underlying the rise of political Islam in Indonesia: Islamic organisations are providing security and sources of livelihoods to many people, while the often rather aloof, elitist proponents of tolerance and religious pluralism do not. These arguments do not only apply to poorer sections of Jakarta’s population. Of course the most vulnerable communities face the strongest pressure to adjust their opinions in order to strengthen and protect their precarious livelihoods. For them a personal opinion is the biggest luxury—which might help explain [why these groups were most susceptible to anti-Ahok campaigns](#).

But the same logic also applies to elites. While less precariously employed, their jobs and status often also depends on maintaining and cultivating personal relations. Many Baswedan supporters will expect that their efforts to support Jakarta’s new governor will be repaid with a job or a government contract. Not a few opinion-makers are susceptible to the patronage of politicians, many of whom had a reason to get rid of Ahok after [he curtailed their access to government budgets](#). And religious leaders at various levels look forward to profiting from their increased prominence under governor Baswedan. In contrast, going against the viewpoint and interest of your organisation can be costly: the brave MUI cleric who testified in favour of Ahok, [is set to be demoted](#). In other words, the opinions of opinion makers are rarely fully unencumbered. Personal cost-benefit analyses contributed to the willingness of opinion-makers to support and legitimise the view that Ahok was guilty of blasphemy.

All this suggests that we need to interpret public debates not only in terms of the individual opinions that are being exchanged, but also in terms of the underlying infrastructure—i.e. the character of the networks through which these opinions are being spread. The popularity of a particular viewpoint—in this case the view that Ahok is guilty of blasphemy—is not necessarily an indication of individual convictions, but rather an indication of the strength of particular social networks.

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