

Interpreting the Jakarta election



Ahok's returns in yesterday's vote for governor show that pluralism and tolerance aren't quite yet sunk in the nation's capital. It also shows that the election is an unusual test case in extreme circumstances, writes Edward Aspinnall.

The Jakarta gubernatorial election, the first round of which took place yesterday (15 February), has attracted much attention for the extraordinarily powerful campaign by Islamic groups to condemn the ethnic Chinese and Christian governor, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama ("Ahok").

Last September, Ahok warned an audience of voters in the Thousand Islands not to be "fooled" by those who were using a particular Quranic verse to enjoin them not to vote for a non-Muslim. Conservative Muslim groups accused Ahok of insulting the Quran, and blasphemy, and organised a series of huge prayer meetings to condemn him. Ahok was eventually charged with blasphemy, and his trial is continuing. Ahok's two rivals, Agus Harimurti Yudhoyono, the son of former President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, and Anies Baswedan, a former minister and Muslim intellectual formerly with a reputation as a moderate, have benefited and supported these campaigns, trying to ride the wave of religious outrage against Ahok.

The effects of this campaign were visible in yesterday's results. Before the controversy, Ahok had recorded over 50 per cent in public opinion polls, suggesting a first-round victory was possible. He was popular for his no-holds-barred approach toward bureaucratic corruption and incompetence, and for improvements in transportation, flood amelioration, healthcare, education and other services that had been introduced by him and his predecessor, Joko Widodo (now Indonesia's president). It had seemed that the Jakarta election would prove that programmatic politics could trump ethnic and religious prejudice.

The blasphemy case was thus a boon to Ahok's opponents, and yesterday Ahok fell well short of a first-round victory, attaining about 43 per cent, ahead of Anies Baswedan (40 per cent) and Agus (17 per cent). Ahok now faces a major challenge to peel away enough of Agus's supporters to get over 50 per cent in the second round. This will be a very difficult task, given that Agus's campaign was heavily implicated in the anti-Ahok mobilisation.

Many observers have depicted the election as a test case for Indonesian pluralism, and as a possible marker of the decline of tolerance and [the rise of Islamist politics in the country](#). There's much to be said about these interpretations, but two points are worth bearing in mind.

First, this sort of mobilisation is not unusual in the Indonesian context, even if its scale has been spectacular this time around. In previous regional head elections where non-Muslim Chinese have stood for election, we have seen very similar attempts to polarise the vote along ethnic and religious lines. Generally, such attempts have succeeded.

For example, in the 2010 mayoral election in Medan, the capital of North Sumatra, a prominent member of the local Chinese community, Sofyan Tan, was standing. During the first round of the election, when several candidates were running, most candidates strove to reach across ethnic and religious lines. Once the choice narrowed to one between Tan and a Malay Muslim candidate, there was a fevered campaign to convince Muslim voters that it was forbidden to vote for a *kafir*, or non-believer. Voting patterns showed a remarkably polarised pattern, with the city's subdistricts delivering votes to the two candidates [in proportion to their religious make up](#).

In Singkawang, a city with a slight ethnic Chinese majority in West Kalimantan, an election in 2012 pitted the Chinese incumbent mayor against another Chinese candidate (who split the Chinese vote) and a Malay Muslim. This election generated a similar atmosphere, complete with demonstrations by the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), one of the groups behind the anti-Ahok protests in Jakarta. Preachers and politicians told Muslim voters that voting for a non-Muslim was *haram*, and the Muslim candidate won a narrow victory. Interviewed a few months later, he cheerfully acknowledged that it had been beneficial to mobilise on religious grounds: "When it's election time, I am a fanatic. But once I win, I go back to normal."

In both of these cases, it is worth noting that the ultimately victorious candidates used anti-Chinese and religious campaigning to overcome what might otherwise have been significant disadvantages.

In Singkawang, the winner was a former mayor who had been implicated in a sex scandal; in Medan the victor had various corruption cases hanging over his head from his previous career as a bureaucrat, and he ended up going to jail.

Of course, Jakarta is much more important for national politics than Medan, let alone Singkawang. The the anti-Ahok protests have been huge, and it has been shocking for many people to see a former president, a leading pluralist Muslim intellectual, and other national figures fanning the flames of sectarian politics. But the lesson from other elections is not only that such mobilisation can be short lived, but that it was predictable. Moreover, Ahok himself presented a soft target given his readiness to comment freely on Islamic religious matters, and his inability to restrain himself when called for – for example, his courtroom attack on Islamic Ulama Council Chairperson Mar'uf Amin two weeks ago was a blunder that brought the blasphemy case back to the centre of the campaign at a time when his supporters had succeeded in convincing many Muslim voters to focus instead on government performance and programs.

A second point, therefore, is that arguably the most remarkable aspect of the election has been not the success of the campaign against Ahok – which was predictable – but rather the resilience of his support. Ahok's vote did not collapse in the wake of the anti-blasphemy campaign, but fell only by 10 or 15 per cent, compared to the pre-blasphemy-case polls. In a city where about 85 per cent of the population are Muslims (with most of the non-Muslims solidly behind Ahok), this means that around a quarter of the Muslim citizens who cast their votes on Wednesday did so for Ahok. They made this choice in the face of a concerted campaign, backed by massive street mobilisations, religious exhortations, and some of the most powerful politicians in the country, telling them that it would be sinful to support him. Various polls have shown that many Muslim voters place performance well ahead of religious or ethnic considerations, and the results on Wednesday confirmed that.

The lesson of the 2010 Medan election is that we can expect even more extreme religious and racial campaigning in the second round. Even if Ahok loses, which seems quite likely, the long-term lessons and implications of this election are thus far from being as clear cut as some of the commentary would have it. If this was a test case for Indonesian pluralism, it was a test case in unusual and extreme circumstances. Moreover, the first round of the voting shows that there is a significant constituency for pluralism, and for programmatic politics, in Indonesia's capital.

Edward Aspinall is Acting Head, Department of Political and Social Change, Professor and ARC Fellow at the ANU Coral Bell School of Asia Pacific Affairs.