

Making enemies out of friends



The evictions regime of Jakarta’s governor, Ahok, has provided ample recruitment opportunities for hardliners, writes Ian Wilson.

In a city where demonstrations are a daily almost banal occurrence, one scheduled for 4 November has left Jakarta on an uncharacteristic edge.

Dominating headlines for several weeks, concerns over the possibilities for violence recently prompted the President, Joko Widodo, to pose for awkward photos on horseback alongside his former presidential rival, Prabowo Subianto -- in a measure apparently intended to ease tensions. Meanwhile, senior figures in the military have speculated out loud of a possible ‘Arab spring’ like uprising, while some analysts have warned of infiltration by ISIS sympathisers.

Organised by the Islamic vigilante organisation the Defenders of Islam Front (FPI) together with a number of other hard-line Islamist groups, it will be the second demonstration in as many months demanding the arrest of Jakarta’s governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, or Ahok, for allegedly insulting the Qur’an.

The rhetoric surrounding the demonstrations has become increasingly ugly and violent in tone. Accusations of blasphemy have merged with overtly racist hate-speech. The governor is an ethnic Chinese Christian. Banners inciting ethnicised violence have popped up around the city, invoking painful memories of the anti-Chinese violence of 1998. With elections for the governor scheduled for February 2017, it has sparked alarms campaigning will be marred by sectarianism.

The FPI are by no means newcomers to this kind of politics, having over the past 16 years mastered the art of prizing open various social and economic tensions, and injecting them with a distinctly unpleasant sectarian odour.

Similar vitriol and threats of violence have been directed against followers of the Ahmadiyah sect, Batak Christians, LGBT and Shiite Muslims, while back in 2001 the FPI protested against the presidency of Megawati on the grounds that it was forbidden for a woman to be leader of a Muslim majority nation.

This mix of wedge politics, morality racketeering and street level thuggery together with a perennial 'use value' to political elites has enabled a relative minnow in comparison to large mainstream Islamic organisations such as Nahdatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah to continue to punch far above its weight. The hype surrounding the demonstration, regardless of whatever transpires, will be seen as invaluable marketing in this regard.

What, however, explains the increasing numbers of poor and working class people rallying around the FPI's vitriolic campaign against the governor? Is this, as [some analysts have suggested](#), signs of growing intolerance and religious extremism allowed to fester unchecked by government, presumably due to fear of prompting an Islamic backlash? Or is it [as others have argued](#), just another case of Jakarta's political elites mobilising rent-a-mobs as part of their jockeying for advantage in the lead up to the February elections?

While the above cannot be wholly discarded it's important here to consider some context. Since taking office as governor in 2014, Ahok has presided over one of the most aggressive campaigns of evictions and forced displacements in the modern history of the city. Reliable statistics on the numbers directly impacted are difficult to come by. However, reports compiled by the Jakarta Legal Aid Foundation estimate that upward of 16,000 overwhelmingly poor and working class families have been displaced in the past two years alone. Only 30 per cent have been offered any alternative accommodation, the social and economic impacts of which have been devastating.

This policy has been immensely popular amongst the cities middle-class and seen as part of an uncompromising effort to tackle endemic problems of flooding, traffic congestion and lawlessness.

What many have failed to consider, or simply ignored, is the massive groundswell of anger and resentment generated by this policy regime. It has spread far beyond the tens of thousands directly impacted through extended family, friends, neighbours and social, cultural and work networks.

This anger has, unsurprisingly, sought to find avenues of expression and amelioration.

When Ahok's entourage was confronted by hundreds of stone-throwing [youths in Penjaringan in the city's north in June](#), some may have been yelling 'Allahu Akbar', but the sentiment animating them was not religious extremism. It was solidarity with friends and neighbours who had lost their homes. As one teenager involved in the violence explained to me, 'I got involved because half of my class have been left homeless by Ahok. He's not welcome here'.

Many of the same youths attended the October demonstration calling for Ahok's arrest, and will likely also be present on 4 November.

Some neighbourhoods now rallying against the governor under banners provided to them by the FPI and other hardliners were just two years earlier some of his most enthusiastic supporters. All have since been subject to forced evictions.

The seeming ease with which religious hardliners and other reactionary groups have been able to capture and shape the tone of opposition to Ahok amongst segments of Jakarta's poor and working class has been made easier by the relative absence of any coherent alternatives.

Since the rise of Jokowi public intellectuals and middle-class activists have largely abandoned the struggles of the city's poor. Mainstream religious organisations such as Nahdatul Ulama have also remained conspicuously silent, despite their membership heartland in Jakarta's north being especially hard hit by forced evictions.

The last hope of many kampung residents was that the self-proclaimed party of the 'little people', the PDI-P, would back an alternative candidate for the governor. When it instead declared its support for Ahok's re-election, the despair and frustration were tangible.

The apparent impunity of the governor, such as his disregard of the legal status quo in [the eviction of Bukit Duri](#), has only served to magnify the perception that he is a law unto himself. In this space, conspiracy theories of cabals of Chinese developers pulling strings have found fertile ground. Rumours of his alleged insulting of the Qur'an were, for many, the final straw.

With no voice or coherent organisational vehicle for those marginalised by Ahok's policies, the door has been left wide open for hardliners. And they have jumped at the opportunity.

For Ahok strategists the apparent 'radicalising' of opposition to him and alarmism generated around 4 November is by no means a bad thing. It provides proof to middle-class constituents that opposition to him is driven by sectarianism, rather than rational grievances, and confirmation that the poor and working class are illiberal and dangerous.

Public debate over the impact of his evictions regime or the legality of the contentious reclamation project in Jakarta Bay has, for the moment, disappeared entirely. Ahok's election campaign manager Ruhut Sitompul, a former senior figure in New Order gangster organisation Pemuda Pancasila, went so far as to refer to the blasphemy demonstrators [as Ahok's 'success team'](#).

Whatever transpires on 4 November the anger of those marginalised and maligned by the administration's policies against the governor will remain. It would pay to take the time to listen.

Ian Wilson is a lecturer in politics and security studies, and a Research Fellow at the Asia Research Centre, Murdoch University.