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## ***The Challenge to Religious Tolerance: Fundamentalists' Resistance to a Non-Muslim Leader in Indonesia***

Hisanori Kato

### **Introduction**

The largest mosque in Southeast Asia, called *Istiqlal*, stands across the street from a Catholic cathedral in the center of the Indonesian capital, Jakarta. These two major religious buildings in Indonesia stand in a rather peaceful setting. In addition, *Candi Borobudur*, which is located in Central Java, is the largest and oldest single Buddhist monument in the world, with more than a 1,200-year-long history. Despite the fact that Indonesia is the most populous Muslim nation in the world,<sup>1</sup> Indonesia has boasted of its religious tolerance for centuries.

Indonesia's multi-religious character has necessitated mutual respect and harmonious co-existence among religions throughout its recorded history. Indonesia's national motto, *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, which means unity in diversity,<sup>2</sup> constitutes an ideological pillar of the country. Not only do cultural heritages express mutual tolerance, but also the political arrangement of the country has been pledged to religious tolerance since the establishment of the Republic of Indonesia.

In fact, at the end of World War II, the preparatory committee for Indonesia's independence drafted a constitution that promised the implementation of *Sharia* law for Muslims. However, the sentence that stated this constitutional obligation was deleted when the constitution was officially promulgated.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the national policy to respect all religions has been installed as *Pancasila* in the constitution of the Republic of Indonesia.<sup>4</sup> This political disposition clearly shows Indonesia's commitment to the creation of a harmonious society, in which the majority religion, Islam, and other minority religions can coexist peacefully.

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<sup>1</sup> According to the official statistics, the proportion of the followers of the six major religions in Indonesia is as follows: Islam 87.18; Protestant 6.96; Catholic 2.91; Hindu 1.69; Buddhism 0.72; Confucianism 0.05 and others. See, the official website of National Statistics Agency (*Badan Pusat Statistik*) at: <http://sp2010.bps.go.id/index.php/site/tabel?search-tabel=Penduduk+Menurut+Kelompok+Umur+dan+Agama+yang+Dianut&tid=320&search-wilayah=Indonesia&wid=0000000000&lang=id>

<sup>2</sup> This state motto was mentioned in the poetry of Tantular in the time of the Majapahit Kingdom (1293-1527). The original meaning is "they are different, but they are same".

<sup>3</sup> Robert Cribb and Colin Brown, *Modern Indonesia*, (London: 1995), 15.

<sup>4</sup> *Pancasila* includes five major principles: Belief in God; National Unity; Humanitarianism; People's Sovereignty; Social Justice and Prosperity. The first principle "Belief in God" refers not only to *Allah* but also to God of any religion.

Nonetheless, it is also true that religious tolerance in Indonesia has been disturbed from time to time in history, such as the nationwide 1998 riots at the time of the fall of the Suharto regime.<sup>5</sup> We witness another example that challenges religious tolerance in Indonesia in 2017: a politician who is a non-Muslim Christian (Protestant) and of Chinese descent was running for the governorship in contest with Muslim candidates. This Chinese-Christian politician, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, or popularly known as Ahok, has been criticized and accused of blasphemy for his comments on *al-Quran* during his campaign in September 2016. As a result, he was defeated in the gubernatorial election in April 2017 and was sentenced for two years imprisonment for blasphemy after the election.<sup>6</sup>

It is important to question whether a long-standing tradition of religious tolerance in Indonesia has been overturned by this political event. Equally important is that we explore the influence of religion in relation to the socio-political behavior of people. In the following parts of this paper, we attempt to find answers to these questions and to comprehend the meaning of this political event thoroughly.

### **The Background of Ahok**

Ahok rose in political prominence when he paired with Joko Widodo, known as Jokowi, then the mayor of Surakarta, for vice-governorship of Jakarta in 2012, although his political career started in 2005, when he was elected to serve as the regent of east Belitung.<sup>7</sup> He was also a member of parliament between 2009 and 2012 until he joined the gubernatorial race with Jokowi. This newly emerging pair from outside of Jakarta with business backgrounds gained a great amount of popularity with the masses and were successfully elected governor and vice-governor, respectively, of Special Designated Capital Jakarta (or DKI Jakarta) in 2012.

The political path of Jokowi, however, continued to the highest position of the republic, when he was elected the president of Indonesia in 2014. Consequently, the vice-governor, Ahok, was elevated to become governor of DKI Jakarta. It was his first gubernatorial election as a governor in 2017, when he paired with a former mayor of the east Javanese town of Blitar, Djarot Saiful Hidayat, who became a deputy in Ahok's administration in 2014.

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<sup>5</sup> During that time, ethnically Chinese Indonesian became a target, and a vast amount of Chinese descendants were victimised by murder, plunder and rape.

<sup>6</sup> Ahok is preparing to appeal to the higher court in May 2017 (the time at which this paper is being written).

<sup>7</sup> Belitung is an island near Sumatra and belongs to the province of the Bangka-Belitung Islands.

During his governorship, Ahok confronted DKI Jakarta parliament members accused of corruption. He made the decision to make the process more transparent by broadcasting the meetings live via YouTube. With these novel means regarding governing DKI Jakarta, Ahok, in spite of his religious and ethnic background, has become one of the rising stars in Indonesian politics. On the other hand, Ahok has often been criticized for his outspokenness and straightforwardness, as it is culturally thought to be more acceptable and polite if one is modest and indirect in Indonesia. However, Ahok believes it is far more important to be professional than to follow traditional Indonesian manners.<sup>8</sup>

### Controversial Comment and the Reaction from Muslims

It was widely expected that Ahok would be the first non-Muslim and non-*pribumi*<sup>9</sup> governor of Jakarta until the end of September 2016, as his popularity was high. However, the tide started to drastically turn for him after he delivered a speech on Pulau Seribu, an island near Jakarta, during his campaign on 27 September 2016. He explained the social welfare programs that his government intended to implement and encouraged the constituency of the island to vote for him. However, during his speech, he mentioned one of the verses of *al-Quran* related to the relationship between Muslims and non-believers such as Christians and Jews. The following is the script of his comment:

Bapak/Ibu (ladies and gentlemen) may not vote for me, because (you have been) lied to by (someone using) Surah *al-Maidah* verse 51 etc. ... So if you cannot vote for me because you are afraid of being condemned to hell you do not need to feel uneasy as you are being fooled. It is all right.<sup>10</sup>

Verse 51 of *al-Maidah* reads as follows: “*Believers, take neither the Jews nor the Christians for your friends. They are friends with one another. Whoever of you seeks their friendship shall become one of their number. God does not guide the wrongdoers.*”<sup>11</sup> This verse is often cited as a theological ground to reject a non-Muslim leader in a Muslim-dominated community.

After the edited footage of his speech was uploaded on YouTube, severe condemnations and criticisms of Ahok became ubiquitous, in which Ahok was accused of “insulting” Islam. Ahok swiftly made a public apology for his comment and attempted to subdue the antagonistic sentiments targeted at him. His own words read as follows:

<sup>8</sup> The author of this paper was told this by Ahok during a meeting with a group of Presidential Friends of Indonesia on 13 August 2014.

<sup>9</sup> *Pribumi* means native, and it usually refers to an ethnically Indonesian Muslim.

<sup>10</sup> Jakarta Post, 10 October 2016. The original script of his speech in Indonesian can be found on the BBC website at: <http://www.bbc.com/indonesia/indonesia-37996601> (last accessed 5th June 2017)

<sup>11</sup> *Al-Quran* 5-51

I apologize to Muslims or other people who feel offended. I never intended to insult Islam or *al-Quran*. I am not an Islam specialist.... If you watch it (the video), you know that I have no intention to insult Islam. .... Even people (Muslims) who were there laughed over my comment.<sup>12</sup>

Despite Ahok's effort to minimize the political damage caused by this incident, the situation became threatening to him as the Indonesian Council of *Ulama* (MUI), the highest Islamic authority in Indonesia, issued a statement to condemn him. The MUI concluded that Ahok was subject to punishment, as he insulted both Islam and the *ulama* (Muslim scholars) in the statement. In the same document, the MUI also encouraged judicial authorities to take a swift legal action against Ahok.<sup>13</sup>

It seems that MUI's statement played an important role in bringing about an emotional reaction from *umat* Islam (Islamic community) in Indonesia in the face of Ahok's comment. The first mass rally condemning Ahok took place in Jakarta on 14 October 2016, and it is said that around 30,000 to 50,000 people joined the demonstration.<sup>14</sup> A greater number of people joined another Islamic mass movement in Jakarta on 4 November 2016. About 100,000 people gathered at the *Istiqlal* Mosque for their Friday prayer and marched to the State Palace nearby. Another mass rally was held on 2 December with about 500,000 participants. These demonstrations were organised by one of the radical Islamic groups called *Front Pembela Islam*, better known as FPI.

The concern of President Jokowi's government was that a possible religiously-driven riot would cause a serious social division in Indonesia. However, the government managed to prevent the participants from becoming violent, and thereby avoided physical destruction of Jakarta. The police and the military deployed 20,000 and 5,000 personnel respectively in order to maintain security in the areas of demonstration. In addition to the tight security measures, a sermon given by Masaruddin Umar, the *imam* of *Istiqlal* Mosque, seems to have contributed to a rather peaceful movement, for he emphasized the importance of Muslims not to be "excessive", as it is stated in *al-Quran*.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> *Republika*, 10 October 2016; *The Jakarta Post*, 10 October 2016. Some Indonesian parts have been translated by the author of this paper.

<sup>13</sup> The original text is available at: <http://www.berita.islamedia.id/2017/02/inilah-tanggapan-lengkap-mui-atas-tuduhan-pengacara-ahok-terhadap-ketua-MUI.html>

<sup>14</sup> *Jakarta Post*, 3 November 2016.

<sup>15</sup> *Jakarta Post*, 4 November 2016.

It is possible to understand the demonstrations as opportunities for Muslims to express their indignation and hatred towards a non-Muslim leader, Ahok. Yet, it is also true that it was an occasion for the whole *umat* Islam in Indonesia to reaffirm their solidarity among Muslims, although we cannot deny the fact that there was sentiment against Ahok during the rally. Ahmad Rais, an executive member of the Ma'arif Institute in Jakarta stated that “many people joined the Friday prayer and rally on 4 November because they merely like to feel the religious atmosphere.<sup>16</sup> Andi Makmur Makka, a noted writer and journalist, also expressed his view that the motivation of the participants of the mass rally on 4 November was not necessarily a merely “anti-Ahok” sentiment, but rather they were willing to be a part of a “trendy” religious movement without knowing the substance of the issue.<sup>17</sup>

Having said this, the political damage that Ahok incurred was by no means trivial. The popularity of Ahok dropped swiftly, and one of the surveys conducted after Ahok's comment showed that any of the three pairs competing for the governorship of DKI Jakarta, Ahok-Djarot, Anies-Sandiaga, and Agus-Silviana, could win the election.<sup>18</sup>

### Umat Divided over the Ahok Issue

The hailstorm of criticism and the demand for punishment against Ahok were spontaneously promoted by quite a few fundamentalist groups apart from the FPI. One of these groups was *Jamaah Anshorusy Syariah* (JAS). They expressed their distress and demanded a public apology from Ahok in a statement issued on 7 October 2016. H. A. Fallah, the leader of the Jakarta Charter of JAS, explained that the punishment against Ahok should be twofold: religious and secular. Fallah said that although the apology made by Ahok can be accepted, there remains the possibility of punishment based on the national secular legal system.<sup>19</sup> Fallah also admits that, should Ahok be elected governor, there would be no choice for him but to accept him, as Shari'a has not been implemented in Indonesia.<sup>20</sup>

Abdul Rohim, another prominent leader of JAS, expressed his distress that president Jokowi is close to communist China.<sup>21</sup> The implication of this statement is that the team of Jokowi and the Chinese-Indonesian Ahok would weaken the position of Islam in the country. It should be noted that the anti-communist campaign at the end of 2016 became more prevalent, with quite a few banners posted in various parts of the country. The political nature of the Ahok issue will be discussed in the later part of this paper.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with the author in Kalibata, 27 December 2016.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with the author in Kebon Juruk, 25 December 2016.

<sup>18</sup> According to the survey conducted by the Populi Centre, the approval rate of Ahok-Djarot is 36.7%, while Anies-Sandi's is 28.5% and Agus-Sylviana's is 25%. Jakarta Post, 30 January 2017.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with the author in Depok, 25 December 2015.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with the author in Depok, 25 December 2015.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with the author in Solo, 3 January 2016.

*Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia* (HTI), which aims to establish a “legitimate caliphate,” also severely rejected Ahok. Ismail Yusanto, one of the highest executives in HTI, explained that HTI never accepted non-Muslims as leaders and never tolerated anyone who insults *al-Quran*.<sup>22</sup> Unlike some political parties such as *Partai Kadilan Sejathera* (PKS), HTI has never supported non-Muslim candidates for the provincial elections.<sup>23</sup> Yusanto genuinely believes that the anti-Ahok mass rallies are the expression of Muslim determination to defend Islam. At the same time, Yusanto understands there might be political interest behind the anti-Ahok movement; however, he believes it is still more important to follow the Islamic duty of condemning blasphemy.

In contrast to those who reject Ahok, there are still some who support and legitimize his political position. Abdurrahman Wahid, also known as Gus Dur (who was the fourth president of Indonesia and a respected Muslim scholar), once conveyed his view on non-Muslim governorship in 2007.<sup>24</sup> Gus Dur clearly stated that one could not connect religion and secular governorship; thus, there was no obstacle for Muslims to elect a non-Muslim as a governor. He also added that this does not imply Muslims should convert to Christianity when choosing a Christian governor.<sup>25</sup> Gus Dur’s view was echoed by the fifth and first woman president of Indonesia, Megawati Sukarnoputri, who stated that “we’re not voting for a religious leader. We will vote for an administrative leader.”<sup>26</sup>

Arif Safri presented a theological argument, saying that Muslims are allowed to have their own political decisions. He cited one of the verses of *al-Quran* to substantiate his argument, that is, “*If Allah so willed, He could make you all one People: but he leaves straying whom He pleases, and He guides whom He pleases.*”<sup>27</sup> Arif also sees a semantic problem in the Ahok issue regarding the content of *al-Maidah-51*. According to Arif, who is an Arabic expert, the word “*awlya*” (translated as “friends” in the English version of *al-Quran*) means “close friends,” not “leader,” although some conservative Muslims understand *awlya* as leader as well. Thus, Arif believes that the anti-Ahok movement, which is attempting to delegitimize Ahok as a governor of DKI Jakarta, has lost ground.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with the author in Kalibata, 28 December 2016.

<sup>23</sup> For example, PKS supported a non-Muslim candidate for the governor of the province of Papua Barat in February 2017.

<sup>24</sup> Abdurrahman Wahid was a leader of *Nahdlatul Ulama*, the largest Islamic organization in Indonesia; he died in 2009.

<sup>25</sup> Gus Dur delivered this speech, joining Ahok’s campaign when Ahok ran for the governor of Bangka-Belitung province in 2007. Full footage of his speech can viewed at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P9sSAksVZFK>

<sup>26</sup> Jakarta Post, 15 March 2015.

<sup>27</sup> *al-Quran*: 16-93

These less-conventional interpretations of theology presented by Arif are the reflection of his ideas that one should have a contextual understanding of Islam rather than a literal understanding.<sup>28</sup> This stance is echoed by other scholars who believe that contemporary social conditions should be considered in relation to the interpretation of Islam. For example, Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im stated that "what is suggested is that the Qur'an and Sunna have been the source of Shari'a as the Islamic response to the concrete realities of the past and must be the source of modern Shari'a as the Islamic response to the concrete realities of today."<sup>29</sup>

R. Ghannouchi also believes that it is possible for Muslims to have a broader perspective and that they could support a non-Islamic government prior to establishing their religious government.<sup>30</sup> Both Gus Dur and Arif seem willing to bring about a more inclusive society with Indonesia's socio-cultural reality in mind.

Ahmad Syafii Ma'arif, a respected Muslim scholar and former leader of the nation's second largest Islamic organisation, *Muhammadiyah*, also expressed his support for Ahok and criticised the statement issued by MUI. He expounded that Ahok had no intention to insult *al-Quran* or *ulama* when making his speech on Pulau Seribu in September 2016. In his own words;

Ahok was talking about people who use *al-Maidah* to discourage people to vote for him. That is why the word, "*pakai*" (use) is mentioned in his speech. Ahok himself did not question the credibility of *al-Quran* itself at all. He did not insult *al-Quran* or *ulama*.<sup>31</sup>

He also deplores that an exclusionary attitude of Muslim thinkers is becoming more pervasive in Indonesia, saying that the core principle of Islam is that all existence in this world created by *Allah* should be blessed and appreciated. He cites one of the verses from *al-Quran*, that is, "*We sent thee not, but as a Mercy for all creatures.*"<sup>32</sup> He hopes that there will be a new generation with a "calmer" and "wiser" attitude regarding understanding Indonesian politics, implying that a political motive is behind the Ahok issue.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Interview with the author in Kota Gede, 1 January 2017.

<sup>29</sup> Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, *Toward an Islamic Reformation*, (New York: 1996), 143-144.

<sup>30</sup> Rachid Ghannouchi, "Participation in non-Islamic Government", in *Liberal Islam*, ed. Charles Kurzman, (New York: 1998), 91-93.

<sup>31</sup> Interview with the author in Yogyakarta, 2 January, 2017.

<sup>32</sup> *al-Quran*: 21-107

<sup>33</sup> Ma'arif, Syafii Ahmad, *Tempo*, 2 December 2016



## The Political Side of the Ahok Issue

It is true that the momentum of the anti-Ahok movement is endorsed by a religious sentiment of the masses. However, we still need to understand this religious phenomenon within the political climate of Indonesia. We, in fact, find complex political elements behind the gubernatorial election of DKI Jakarta in 2017, which was widely believed to be the preliminary skirmish for the presidential election that will take place in 2019. The popularity of Ahok is tacitly regarded as the approval of the constituency for Jokowi, and it is vital for those who intend to compete with current president Jokowi in 2019 to overtake Ahok.

Each gubernatorial candidate for DKI Jakarta in 2017 seems to have his own political agenda. Anies is supported by a political party called *Gerakan Indonesia Raya* (Gerindra), chaired by Prabowo Subianto, a former son-in-law of Suharto. The origin of the political rivalry between Prabowo Subianto and Jokowi was firmly seeded in the time of the presidential election in 2014, when both ran for the highest position of the Republic of Indonesia. Despite the fact that Jokowi, then Jakarta governor with his deputy Ahok, was declared the winner of the election, Prabowo Subianto refused to accept the results.

Although Prabowo had to accept the decision of the Constitutional Court that acknowledged the victory of Jokowi in the end, we can assume that Prabowo Subianto still holds his firm ambition to take Jokowi's position in the next presidential election in 2019. Therefore, it was crucially important for Anies, as a representative of Prabowo, to win the gubernatorial election in order to display the political potential of *Gerindra*.

Agus Yudhoyono, another candidate in the gubernatorial election of DKI Jakarta in 2017, is a son of former president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. Yudhoyono desperately needs to maintain his party's presence in the national political arena in order to face the presidential election in 2019. We can easily imagine that Ahok's comment on *al-Quran* could be utilised by his competitors as a political weapon to discredit Ahok. Thus, the mobilisation of anti-Ahok rallies in October, November, and December could be the result of a political manoeuvre to curtail the political credibility of Ahok by his opponents.

Knowing this political nature of the Ahok issue, we need to remember one of the darkest political memories in Indonesia, that is, the killings of Communist Party (PKI) members in the mid-1960s.<sup>34</sup> This incident, called *Gerakan September Tiga Puluh* or *Gestapu*, is still regarded as taboo in Indonesia, which results in “the absence of public discussion and careful study of the killings.”<sup>35</sup> For Indonesians, should one be branded as a communist or should one’s family be related to *Gestapu*, this means a termination of social life in the country.

The term *Gestapu* invariably reminds Indonesians of the influence of China. Thus, the combination of being Chinese and Communist is the worst social status in the country. The greater presence of Chinese, including manual laborers, in Indonesia has been a much debated political issue since 2016, which was the time of the gubernatorial election. Jokowi’s administration,<sup>36</sup> in fact, has been troubled by so-called “fake news” in relation to Chinese migrant workers by his political opponents.<sup>37</sup> Ahok, with his Chinese background, is vulnerable to tacit antipathy of *Gestapu* and the Chinese presence in Indonesia.

It is true that banners that read “*Waspadai Bangkitnya PKI!*” (Be careful with the revival of PKI) were ubiquitous in various parts of Indonesia in the time of the election campaign. Needless to say, this trend can be seen as a patriotic movement that intends to safeguard Indonesia from Communism and the economic invasion of China. However, it is also plausible to regard this as the attempt to discredit Ahok, implying that he is a symbol of the Chinese invasion into Indonesia and the revival of Communism.

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<sup>34</sup> On 30 September 1965, it is said that some Communist members attempted to seize power in a coup d’état. However, they were swiftly subdued by General Suharto, and it resulted in the fall of Sukarno, the first president of Indonesia, and the mass killing of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) members and their sympathisers.

<sup>35</sup> John Rosa, *Pretext for Mass Murder*, (London: 2006), 24.

<sup>36</sup> For example, Fadli Zon, vice-speaker of the parliament and secretary general of *Gerindra* expressed his concern that an increase of the Chinese labour force would be a “threat” to the Indonesian local labour market. See, *Parlementaria*, Edisi 145<sup>th</sup>, XLVII 2017, pp.8-9.

<sup>37</sup> In December 2016, Joko Widodo gave instructions to investigate the source of the “fake news” that reported that 10 million Chinese workers had already entered Indonesia, which was untrue. *The Straits Times*, 10 January, 2017

## The End of Tolerance?

Ahok appeared to be the most popular candidate among the three contenders, with 42.96% of the vote, while Anies and Agus obtained 39.97% and 17.06% respectively when the first round of the election took place on 15 February 2017.<sup>38</sup> As none of the candidates were successful in obtaining 50% of the vote, the first two candidates, that is, Ahok and Anies, proceeded to the final round of the election on 19 April 2017. The final choice of the constituency of Jakarta was Anies, who received 57.95% of the votes, while Ahok obtained 42.05% of them.<sup>39</sup>

Some may perceive this as an apprehensive development in the country in relation to religious harmony.<sup>40</sup> However, it is too hasty to conclude that this is the end of religious tolerance in Indonesia. First of all, we should remember that the margin between the two candidates in the final round of the election was rather slim, with a difference of less than 900,000. This suggests that there is still a vast amount of Muslims who voted for Ahok, a non-Muslim.

Secondly, *Nahdlatul Ulama* (NU) and *Muhammadiyah*, which are the two most influential Muslim organisations in the country, have maintained carefully disciplined composure regarding the Ahok issue. Both organizations cautiously called on their members not to be influenced by political propaganda.<sup>41</sup> For example, Said Aqil Siradj, the chairperson of NU, clearly stated that the members of NU would not be allowed to participate in an anti-Ahok Rally in November, while *Muhammadiyah* discouraged their members from joining it.<sup>42</sup> In addition, NU warmly accepted Ahok to their prayer, which was held at *al-Huda* Mosque, even after Ahok made a comment on *al-Quran* in September 2016.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Indonesian Election Commission Official website:

[https://pilkada2017.kpu.go.id/hasil/t1/dki\\_jakarta](https://pilkada2017.kpu.go.id/hasil/t1/dki_jakarta) (last accessed on 3 May 2017)

<sup>39</sup> Indonesian Election Commission Official website:

[https://pilkada2017.kpu.go.id/hasil/2/t1/dki\\_jakarta](https://pilkada2017.kpu.go.id/hasil/2/t1/dki_jakarta) (last accessed on 3 May 2017) The website also shows the total number of votes for the two candidates, that is, 3,240,332 votes for Anies and 2,351,245 votes for Ahok.

<sup>40</sup> The *Economist* reported on this election with a headline that reads: “A tense election threatens Indonesia’s religious tolerance”. It also says that “Mr Baswedan (Anies) is not about to impose Islamic law in Jakarta. But hardline forces helped him win. That genie is not easily returned to the bottle”. See, <http://www.economist.com/news/asia/21721144-hardline-muslim-agitators-help-defeat-christian-incumbent-tense-election-threatens>

<sup>41</sup> Prior to the final round of the election, Said Aqil Siradj, the chairperson of NU, expressed the political neutrality of NU, saying that “if you are happy with Ahok, choose Ahok, and if you are happy with Anies, choose Anies. <http://www.nu.or.id/post/read/76818/kiai-said-islam-agama-mulia-belalah-dengan-cara-mulia> (last accessed 4 June, 2017)

<sup>42</sup> Jakarta Post, 1 November 2016.

<sup>43</sup> Jakarta Post, 6 February, 2017.

Taufiq Damas, a young NU activist, also showed his support for Ahok, saying that “Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok) has shown great attention to Muslims in his achievement...”<sup>44</sup> Taufiq also emphasised that the Republic’s constitution, which has never prevented anyone from taking a governmental position regardless of religion, should be appreciated.<sup>45</sup>

Thirdly, we need to understand the temperamental influence of religion over the attitude of the Indonesian people. Before Ahok made his comment on *al-Maida* 51 in September 2016, his popularity was high enough to assure his governorship.<sup>46</sup> The author also conducted unofficial interviews with some residents of Jakarta in March 2016; the interviewees included taxi drivers, food vendors, and shop clerks. It is no exaggeration to say that 8 out of 10 of these people showed support to Ahok. However, Ahok’s popularity dropped rapidly after the Pulau Seribu incident in September 2016.

This means that his comment on *al-Quran* offended the feelings of Muslims. Nonetheless, we have already observed that Ahok managed to secure most of his votes in the first round of the election, and much of Ahok’s support came from Muslims. Muslims who still support Ahok after the incident of September 2016 possess their own steadfast religious and political attitudes, which are on their face tolerant and moderate.

However, it is important to note that there are certain Muslims who swung to the anti-Ahok camp after the incident. It can be assumed that these Muslims have not established their own firm religious and political positions, and we might call them the “vacillating mass.” They are by no means so-called fundamentalists who endorse religious rigidity. They are, however, more vulnerable to “fake news.”

It is more precise to say that their emotions have been stirred by Ahok’s comment, and they feel that Islam was insulted. Furthermore, religion has a way of making people emotional, for they feel that their existence itself is denied when their faith is downplayed. This “offended feeling,” in fact, brought the vacillating mass to the anti-Ahok side, without a serious examination of what was intended by Ahok. In other words, should there be an event that reflects positively on Islam, they would have a favorable emotional response towards whoever brought about that event.

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<sup>44</sup> Jakarta Post, 22 October, 2016.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> According to one of the surveys, the approval rate for Ahok in March 2016 was 59.3%. See: Jakarta Post, 7 October 2016.

It is interesting to see the survey that shows the degree of satisfaction of Jakarta residents towards the performance of Ahok's government. Although Ahok was not chosen as a governor, the survey conducted by *Lembaga Survei Indonesia* (Indonesia Survey Organization) right before the election shows that the satisfaction rate towards Ahok's administration reached 73 %.<sup>47</sup> This might suggest that the trend against Ahok is caused by impulsive emotional reactions and is, thus, temporary. Furthermore, the emotional effect of religion might have diverted some Muslim voters from supporting Ahok.

## Conclusion

The Ahok issue is far from over as the North Jakarta District Court found Ahok guilty of blasphemy and sentenced him to two years of imprisonment on 9 May 2017. After the verdict, Ahok expressed his intention to appeal to the higher court. It will take a rather longer period to bring his struggle to an end.

It is true that the Ahok issue has presented a serious challenge to religious tolerance in Indonesia; however, it is misleading to conclude that the result of the gubernatorial election in 2017 automatically means the termination of Indonesia's tradition of religious harmony. Statistics shows that Ahok still has a significant supporters who are presumably Muslim. In addition, influential Islamic organizations, such as NU, still maintain a rather tolerant attitude towards Ahok. The Ahok issue is deeply related to secular politics, including the presidential election in 2019. It is more correct to understand the anti-Ahok movement in relation to the political reality in the country rather than the substantial religious attitude of the people.

Most important, however, we should remember that the anti-Ahok trend has been influenced by a volatile aspect of religion, which incites the emotions of its followers. This factor moved the vacillating mass to adopt a seemingly intolerant attitude. Nonetheless, this sort of emotional reaction can be impetuous. Yet, the possibility of the most populous Muslim country, Indonesia, becoming more intolerant cannot be ruled out, for the "vacillating masses" could come to possess a more exclusive ideology towards non-Muslims. Thus, it is vital that Muslim scholars such as Syafii Ma'arif and Afrif, mentioned above, constantly exhibit their inclusive and tolerant views towards non-Muslims, reminding all Muslims of the importance of being rational in relation to Islamic practice, just as a noted Muslim scholar, Nurcholish Madjid, encouraged Muslim intellectuals to pursue a progressive attitude in thinking.

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<sup>47</sup> 13 April 2017, Detik.com News

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