

The Political Power of Faith:

Religious Influence in the 2016-17 Jakarta Election

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Abstract

This essay examines how religious beliefs shape political behaviour by analysing the 2016-17 Jakarta gubernatorial election. It argues that religion operated not merely as a theological reference point, but as a strategic political tool that provided ontological security, mobilised emotive appeal, and reshaped public understandings of legitimacy. Through the delegitimization of Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok), religion was used to sacralise identity and frame political contestation as an existential threat to the moral order. Conversely, rival candidates drew on religious narratives to stabilise uncertainty and cultivate moral reassurance, demonstrating religion's dual capacity to delegitimise and legitimise political authority. In the context of Indonesia, its formal commitments to pluralism alongside strong Islamic social norms reveals how democratic competition can be driven by shared moral narratives as much as by political performance. Understanding these dynamics highlights the institutional and emotive power of religion in sustaining political legitimacy within democratic systems.

Introduction

Religion has long been recognised as a potent force in politics, capable of shaping identities and mobilising collective action. This essay argues that religious beliefs are strategically used as tools for ontological security and emotive appeal in politics. Through the case study of the 2016-17 Jakarta gubernatorial election, this essay demonstrates how religion was used to reshape political identity and monopolise the truth, without the formal suspension of democratic norms. It enabled the imprisonment of Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok) and gave moral leverage for other candidates. This case study is particularly instructive because Indonesia, as the world's largest Muslim-majority democracy, formally upholds religious pluralism while simultaneously sustaining strong Islamic social norms. This essay proceeds in three sections. First, I clarify how religion is conceptualised and examine its political role within the Indonesian context. Second, I analyse how religion mobilised delegitimisation, constructing Ahok as a moral threat. Third, I explore how religion can also be used for legitimisation, which in this case leveraged other candidacies in the election, before reflecting on the broader implications for democracy and pluralism in Indonesia. This analysis does not promote Islamophobic interpretations, rather, it critically examines how religion becomes an apparent political tool within democratic systems.

Conceptualising Religion and Its Contextual Background

In this essay, religion is understood not simply as a private spiritual practice, but as a socially embedded system of beliefs and tradition that shapes identity, ethics, and perceptions of order (Mandaville 2025, p. 379). The source of religion itself is located beyond human or natural agency which grants religious claims a sense of permanence and transcendence that is difficult to contest through purely rational means (Kinnvall 2004, p. 759). Meanwhile, it provides a moral framework through which communities interpret legitimacy, authority, and belonging. This understanding allows religion to function as a tool to transform political disagreements into moral imperatives.

To analyse how this transformation occurs in practice, this essay draws on two key theoretical concepts, which are ontological security and emotive appeal. Ontological security refers to the security of being (Giddens 1991), where one possesses a stable sense of self and continuity in the face of uncertainty. A nation's ontological security is composed of many factors, one of which is religion. This is because when political change, elites, or social diversity is perceived as threatening moral order, religion can offer reassurance by affirming fixed identities and moral boundaries (Kinnvall 2004, p. 755); securing a stable sense of self. Alongside this lies emotive appeal. Evolving from Marcus' study of emotions in politics, emotive appeal can be defined as a strategy to win political support by eliciting emotional responses from the intended recipients (Marcus 2000, p. 222). It mobilises responses such as fear, anger, or pride, rather than policy-based reasoning which are in cases more effective to push political agendas. When ontological security is challenged, these emotional responses often intensify, producing defensiveness that can lead to the sacralisation of

identity. This occurs when political identities are infused with religious meaning (Magcamit 2020, p. 688), rendering them morally absolute and resistant to compromise.

Indonesia provides fertile ground for this form of religious mobilisation due to the way religion is embedded institutionally and socially. The Indonesian state endorses religious pluralism through the ideology of *Pancasila*, recognising six official religions and formally guarantees freedom of belief (Republic of Indonesia 1999). However, this framework presents a state-managed pluralism. While all recognised religions are formally “equal”, informal hierarchies persist. With 87% of Indonesians being Muslim (Stirling 2024), they occupy a dominant cultural and political position. This produces tension between constitutional pluralism and everyday political practice, where non-Muslim identities remain the “othered” minority. Despite a democratic system, Islamic organisations have played a central role as moral authorities in Indonesia (Epley and Jung 2016, p. 55). They shape public norms regarding morality, education, leadership, and legitimacy in line with their religion. Aceh, for instance, illustrates how religion operates as a governing framework as they govern simultaneously with Islamic Law or Shari’ah (Siregar 2008, p. 144). This reinforces the idea that moral order is inseparable from religious authority and is intertwined with governance structures and public expectations.

This religious force is visible in contemporary politics and social norms. High-ranking political figures (e.g. president or vice president) in Indonesia have overwhelmingly been held by Muslims, raising the perception that religious identity is a prerequisite for national leadership. Even in pop culture and media, public figures who convert to Islam are often celebrated as morally improved,

gaining fame from it; while those who move away from Islam frequently face backlash. These patterns signal that religion functions as a marker of trustworthiness and social harmony, shaping public perceptions of legitimacy well beyond formal institutions. Taken together, these dynamics demonstrate that religion's political power in Indonesia is not accidental or a phase, yet embedded. This context is essential to understand how religion was mobilised in Jakarta's gubernatorial election.

Religion as Delegitimisation

In the case of Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok), religion functioned as a primary mechanism for political mobilisation through emotive politics. This process transformed the 2016-17 Jakarta Gubernatorial Election from a contest over governance into a moral and religious imperative, ultimately contributing to Ahok's electoral defeat and imprisonment (Nastiti and Ratri 2018, p. 197). Rather than operating through formal political parties, religious mobilisation relied on moral authority, narratives and everyday social pressure to redefine political legitimacy.

Prior to the religious controversy, Ahok was a political figure widely recognised for his directness, but also a strong governance record, including bureaucratic reform, infrastructure development, and a firm anti-corruption stance. His leadership style emphasised accountability and efficiency, which appealed to many voters in Jakarta (Warburton and Aspinall 2019, p. 259). At this stage, his political legitimacy is derived primarily on policy outcomes and competence. Despite this, Ahok's identity markers were never entirely absent. As a Chinese-Indonesian, Christian, and elite figure, he occupied multiple positions within Indonesia's Muslim-majority political landscapes. However,

these identity markers existed as background vulnerabilities rather than decisive obstacles; it did not override his performance. This indicates that identity difference alone was insufficient to delegitimise Ahok, and it became politically influential, only once it was reframed as a religious threat.

The turning point occurred following Ahok's speech referencing *Al-Maidah* 51, which was rapidly reframed and edited as an insult to Islam (Nastiti and Ratri 2018, p. 203). What had initially been a political statement concerning electoral manipulation through the use of mis-interpreting the *Quran*, turned into an act of blasphemy. The controversy no longer concerned what Ahok meant in political terms, but about the perceived insult to Islam itself. The framing of Ahok committing blasphemy positioned the religion Islam, and its followers as being under existential threat; generating fears of moral disorder and erosion of identity. This is where ontological security takes part. Feeling like Islam's moral security is attacked, mass protests against Ahok occurred, most notably being the *Aksi Bela Islam* rallies and the 212 movements, responsible for transforming public pressure into institutional outcomes (Alkatiri 2023, p. 3).

These demonstrations displayed collective Islamic pride and political power, reinforcing a shared moral identity grounded in religious solidarity. This is only made possible through emotive appeal, as these movements prioritised anger and fear rather than Ahok's action itself. Communities used emotive narratives, emphasising humiliation and disrespect to mobilise the idea that Ahok is not a political rival, but a moral and religious threat to Islam. It creates the public sentiment that: to defend Islam was to oppose Ahok. Religious leaders and organisations further circulated narratives

that it was sinful to elect a non-Muslim leader. Thus, in this context, religion became a site of existential defence rather than belief alone, leading political action in the pursuit of ontological security.

As riots turned to prosecution, Ahok was convicted under Indonesia's 'blasphemy law' and sentenced to two years in prison (Alkatiri 2023, p. 6). This illustrates how religion was institutionalised within the political process as it enabled moral claims to acquire formal authority. While the 'blasphemy law' is designed to preserve inter-religious harmony, in practice, it operates as a political instrument that reinforces dominant religious parties and public sentiment. Ahok's legal process was deeply shaped by public pressure and mass mobilisation, raising questions about its legal necessity. The conviction served more as a meaning to reaffirm moral order in the face of perceived transgression. In this sense, religion redefined political legitimacy by utilising moral boundaries that policy could not cross. In the process, it's important to highlight that democracy was not suspended, but constrained from within. Furthermore, this reconfiguration of legitimacy sets the stage for understanding how other candidates benefited from the same religious dynamics.

Religion as Legitimation

If the delegitimation of Ahok in the election was driven by fear, outrage, and moral panic, the success of his rivals depended on offering a sense of security. Following the intense religious mobilisation, voters increasingly sought stability and moral reassurance rather than policy innovation. The political environment had been saturated with anxiety over religious insult and moral disorder, creating a demand for leadership that could symbolically restore harmony; at least

as defined by the religious majority. At this stage, ontological security shifted from the defensive impulse to “protect Islam” towards the desire to re-establish certainty through electoral choice. Voting became a means to choose which candidate felt safest religiously and existentially. Religion therefore functioned not only as a mobilising force against Ahok, but as an emotive tool through which rivals can benefit from.

Anies Baswedan, Ahok’s principal rival, was positioned as a morally safe alternative through subtle yet effective self-advertisement and religious signalling. Rather than engaging in overtly extremist rhetoric, he was presented as a devout Muslim, culturally embedded within Jakarta’s Islamic base, and non-confrontational in tone (Sulistiyanto 2018, p. 160). He is seen as the complete opposite of Ahok, and this positioning allowed Islamist mass organisations to engage more around him without requiring explicit endorsement of hardline agendas. This approach allowed him to maintain broad electoral appeal while simultaneously benefitting from the moral authority of Islamic organisations. Drawing back to emotive politics, rather than mobilising anger and fear, religious narratives surrounding Anies elicited emotions such as trust, belonging, and social harmony. These responses were collective and evident through sermons, social media, and community gatherings. Faced with social pressure, voters were then offered a clear and emotionally resonant formula to affirm ontological security: a Muslim leader equated moral safety (Kinnvall 2004, p. 758). Political choice became embedded in shared sentiment rather than individual deliberation. Religion thus reshaped the evaluative criteria of governance itself, prioritising emotional security over administrative capability.

As emotional security gradually replaces policy competence as the stronger basis of political judgment, religious actors were able to endorse electoral choice accordingly. Through theological framing, these groups framed the election as a religious test, urging voters to support a Muslim leader and avoid committing a “sinful act” (Nastiti and Ratri 2018, p. 198). Crucially, this process relied less on political parties and more on mass religious organisations, whose deep social reach enabled them to constitute what was considered “right” and “wrong”, transforming the election to an act of religious obedience. Of course, minority religious groups; Christians, Catholics, Hindu, Buddhist, Confucianism, and even some Muslim communities argue against this framing. However, their voices were overridden by the widespread emotive appeal that dominated the majority of Jakarta’s citizens.

This further proves that religion did not overthrow democracy in the Jakarta election. Elections were held and votes were cast. However, religious mobilisation fundamentally reshaped democratic competition from within. Ontological security became crucial in offering voters a sense of solid ground, and in this case, morality defined through religious identity outweighed governance outcomes and policy debates. Having delegitimised Ahok through moral grounds, religion legitimised other candidates by enabling the promise of moral reassurance. This demonstrates how democracy can be profoundly reshaped by religious beliefs without being formally suspended.

Conclusion

This essay has explored how religious beliefs in politics are a powerful force, capable of shaping legitimacy. Through the 2016-17 Jakarta Gubernatorial Election, religion functioned simultaneously as a tool of delegitimisation and legitimisation, enabled by its capacity to provide ontological security and mobilise emotive appeal. Ahok's delegitimisation illustrates how sacralisation of identity can turn political contestation into existential threat to religious order. At the same time, the success of rival candidates demonstrates how religion can stabilise political uncertainty by offering moral reassurance and symbolic safety. Ultimately, this case highlights that the political power of religion in Indonesia is not purely theological, but institutionally and emotionally sustained in the public. These dynamics highlight the strategic power of religion in shaping political behaviour, and offer insight into how democratic competition can be driven by shared moral narratives as much as by governing capabilities. Understanding how religious beliefs shape politics contributes to a more just political order, one that prioritises responsibility and action over moral absolutism while still recognising the ethical contributions of religion.

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