

JAKARTA'S 2017 GUBERNATORIAL ELECTION and the Future of Indonesian Politics

By Stefani Nugroho

Since the formation of the country, Indonesia's diversity has posed a challenge to national integration. A shared sense of belonging to Indonesia had to be instilled among a large number of people with different preexisting ethnic, cultural, and religious loyalties, and, moreover, who had different visions of the postcolonial state. The first two presidents, Sukarno and Suharto, who between them ruled the nation for fifty-three years, employed authoritarian means to hold the sprawling archipelagic country together. It was only in 1998 that Indonesia started the process of democratization. Regulations that suffocated free speech were nullified. In 2004, a direct presidential election was held for the first time, and elections continued in subsequent years with growing success. The country has often been lauded for the effective implementation of regional autonomy¹ and for being a moderate Islamic country.² Another source of discontent that has led to separatist sentiments is the wide socioeconomic gap between the most developed island, Java, where 57 percent of Indonesians live, and the other islands, which the current president, Joko Widodo, is actively tackling.³ In light of these developments, the 2017 gubernatorial election in Jakarta, the capital, is an obvious setback. It was viciously divisive, opening up frictions between Muslims and non-Muslims, and between the so-called *pribumi*,⁴ or the indigenous population, and Chinese Indonesians, a group that, despite making up a mere 2 percent of the country's population, owns a sizable portion of the country's wealth.⁵ Given that Jakarta serves as Indonesia's sociopolitical barometer, it is imperative to explore what the gubernatorial election can tell us about the challenges faced by Indonesia in order to become a pluralistic democracy.

The Rise and Fall of Ahok

The key figure of the 2017 election is Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, better known by his Hakka nickname, Ahok.⁶ A Protestant Christian of Chinese descent in a country dominated by Javanese Muslims, Ahok is a double minority.⁷ He started his political career as regent of East Belitung, part of the Belitung Islands, located about 245 miles north from Jakarta off the coast, and was a member of the national House of Representatives from 2007 to 2012. Ahok was Jakarta's vice governor from 2012 to 2014, when he had to take over gubernatorial duties when then-governor, Joko Widodo, became the country's president. In the two years that Ahok was in charge of the city, like Widodo, he was shown to be progressive, pragmatic, transparent, and hands-on. Ahok managed to solve Jakarta's longstanding flooding problem and was on his way to tackle the city's perpetual traffic congestion. He enforced neglected old policies, for instance on mandated construction of affordable housing by property developers, and refined existing ones, such as increasing the budget for subsidies for the underprivileged.

Of course, not everyone agreed with his decisions. Some residents of riverbanks refused to be relocated to public housing when they were required to clear up the space to normalize rivers, while fishermen protested his reclamation plans in the Bay of Jakarta. Politically, Ahok faced opposition from groups who were not welcoming of the changes he proposed. Notable is, for instance, Ahok's dispute with the Jakarta City Council,



The 2017 candidates (left to right): Incumbent Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok), Agus Yudhoyono, and the eventual winner, Anies Baswedan. Sources: Wikimedia Commons at <https://tinyurl.com/y8ddk9f9>, *Sultra Times* website at <https://tinyurl.com/yaemzrz5>, and Wikimedia Commons at <https://tinyurl.com/yatnqnr>.

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the city's legislative body, over the city administration's proposed budget. While the executive branch, led by Ahok, proposed a budget of IDR 78 trillion (US \$5.9 billion), the legislative branch proposed IDR 90 trillion (US \$6.8 billion), causing Ahok to publicly accuse them of wasteful spending.⁸ Despite these dissenting voices, polling showed Ahok's electability was still unrivaled in June 2016, seven months before the first round of the election in February 2017.⁹

During his run for governorship, Ahok faced two opponents who were both supported by old-time politicians. The first was Agus Yudhoyono, the eldest son of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, Indonesia's former president, and the second was Anies Baswedan, backed by Prabowo, the military general who had run against Widodo for the presidency and lost.¹⁰ Yudhoyono, a thirty-nine-year-old Harvard graduate, had never held a public office position before. Up until a few weeks prior to declaring his candidacy for governor, he was a military officer. Baswedan, on the other hand, was appointed by Widodo as the minister of education and culture in 2014. Holding a PhD in political science from Northern Illinois University, Baswedan was the president of a private university in Jakarta and initiated a program that aimed to redress regional inequality in education. In 2016, he was reshuffled from his position as minister for reasons that have not been made public. Despite being backed by different political parties and running against each other, the campaign strategies of Yudhoyono and Baswedan largely targeted Ahok's weak points. Both tried to appeal to the urban poor, particularly evicted residents of riverbanks and fishermen, and emphasized the fact that, unlike Ahok, both are Muslims.

A comparison of these strategies indicates the religious angle of attack was the most effective. A video of Ahok's speech during a work visit to the Thousand Islands, off Jakarta Bay, proved to be consequential. In this speech, he told the audience, somewhat offhandedly, that he would understand if they would not vote for him because they had been told by Islamic

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Islamist protests against Ahok in Jakarta, March 2017. Source: Wikimedia Commons at <https://tinyurl.com/yd3c8hr7>, Cahaya Maulidiana.

clerics that doing so would be against one of the verses of the *Qur'an*.¹¹ The video of his speech went viral after it was edited in such a manner that suggests Ahok blamed the *Qur'an* for misleading people. Conservative Islamic groups, like the Front of Islam Defenders (FPI), were quick to accuse Ahok of having insulted Islam. They portrayed Ahok as an infidel, thus not qualified to govern over Muslims. Concurrently, both Yudhoyono and Baswedan actively courted hard-line Islamic groups. The convergence of religious conservatism and political opportunism proved to be mightily effective in steering the public discourse.

The depiction of Ahok as an enemy of Islam spread rapidly, and calls to imprison Ahok for blasphemy gathered traction. On November 16th, 2016, the national police declared Ahok suspect in the blasphemy case. The Islamic hard-line groups continued to actively dissuade people from supporting Ahok. They organized anti-Ahok demonstrations, calling these the Action to Defend Islam, thereby implying that this was a matter between all Muslims against all those of other religions. Between October 2016 and May 2017, seven demonstrations were held in Jakarta. On November 4th, 2016, the rally ended with a minor riot in a predominantly Chinese neighborhood where a mini-market was looted, and on December 2nd, 2016, between 200,000 and 500,000 people took to the streets of Jakarta demanding Ahok's imprisonment. This was by far the largest demonstration in the past few years and continues to be remembered as "212" (2 December [12]).¹² Ironically, the intensity and frequency of protests were not unlike in 1998, when student demonstrations led to the fall of Suharto. Along with these visible mass gatherings, persuasion and intimidation took place in local mosques. For example, up to 1,000 provocative banners were found hung in the mosques, some of them stating that no funeral ceremony would be given to deceased people who were pro-Ahok during their lifetimes. Many Muslims became worried that voting for him was a sinful act.

Another target of attack, although arguably weaker, was Ahok's Chinese identity. The Chinese-Indonesians, are often stereotyped as being wealthier than other ethnic groups. Therefore, his opponents often depicted Ahok as prioritizing the interests of Chinese and Chinese-Indonesian entrepreneurs, an attitude supposedly demonstrated by the many government projects that are financed by private companies.¹³ Unlike many of his predecessors, Ahok was known to actively encourage the collaboration

between Jakarta's provincial government and the private sector. He used corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs to bear the costs of a substantial number of parks and child-friendly integrated public spaces (RPTRA community centers, one of Ahok's innovations). According to him, CSR budgets were more flexible and adaptive to the needs of the society they served and produced a better quality of infrastructure in comparison to government budgets. Ahok targeted that by 2017, half the 200 RPTRAS built would have used CSR funds. This strategy was, however, perceived as a sign of Ahok's preferential treatment for Chinese businesses.

There were countermovements from moderate Muslims and people of other faiths often taking the form of gatherings to light candles for Ahok and/or Indonesia's unity and diversity. In the first round of the gubernatorial election in February 2017, Ahok was still able to obtain the majority of the votes with 42.9 percent, while Baswedan obtained 39.97 percent and Yudhoyono a mere 17 percent.¹⁴ Yudhoyono had to withdraw from the race due to the low number of votes, and it became obvious that in the second round, his voters would support

Baswedan. Indeed, in the second round of the election, in May 2017, Ahok obtained 42 percent, and Baswedan won with 58 percent of votes.¹⁵ Voter turnout, at 78 percent for the second round, was significantly higher than the turnout at the previous election in 2012 (66.71 percent) and higher than the target of the General Election Commission, which was 77.5 percent. This indicates the strong sentiments of the general public regarding the election. Not long after this, Ahok was tried, found guilty of blasphemy, and sentenced to two years' imprisonment.

The exit polls done by research center Indikator Politik suggest that religion might be the strongest determinant of how people cast their votes in Jakarta's provincial election.¹⁶ Fifty-seven percent of those voting for Baswedan, almost the exact percentage of votes that he received, did so because they share the same religion. Oddly, the percentage of people who positively appraised Ahok's performance was higher than the actual votes he received. Almost 72 percent of survey respondents were either satisfied or very satisfied with Ahok's performance as governor, and 58 percent of survey respondents thought that the current economic conditions were better than the previous year's. In other words, given that only 42 percent of people actually voted for Ahok, about 20 to 30 percent of the people in Jakarta who were pleased with Ahok's performance as governor still did not vote for him.

Nationwide Repercussions

The impact of the election reverberated far beyond Jakarta. Across the archipelago, people took sides (see Figure 1). In provinces where Islam is not the dominant religion, like Bali (83.5 percent are Hindus, according to the 2010 census) and East Nusa Tenggara (88.88 percent are Christians), people rallied in support of Ahok. Conversely, in Muslim-dominated provinces, like Aceh (98.19 percent are Muslims) and West Sumatera (97.2 percent are Muslims), rallies against Ahok were held. From the geographical extremities of the country where separatism was or is an issue, the demands are diametrically opposed. In West Papua (60.7 percent are Christians), people held up signs stating, "To reject Ahok is to reject Papua" and "If Ahok can't be the governor of Jakarta, he can be the president of Papua."¹⁷ At the same time, reports from Aceh showed signs that said, "If Indonesia is ruled by an Ahok supporter, Aceh will demand separation from Indonesia."¹⁸ In North Sumatera, the anti-Ahok crowd was forceful enough to successfully have

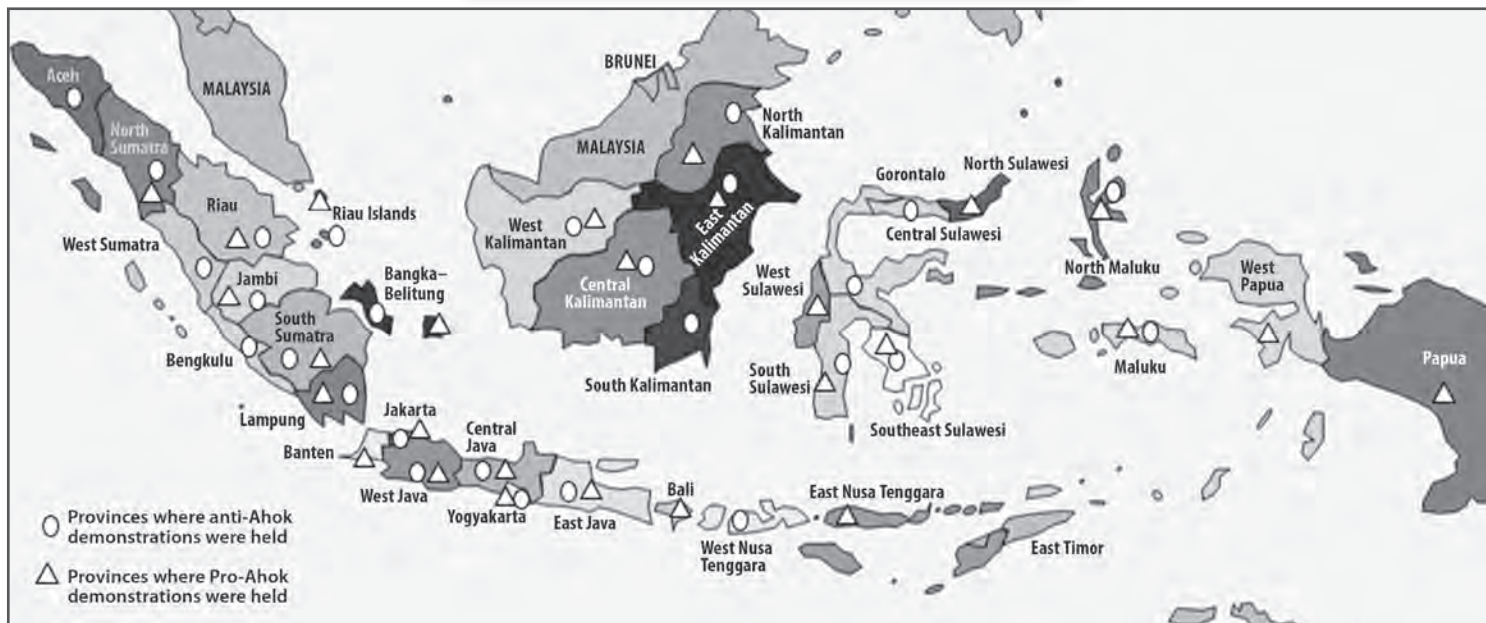


Figure 1: Map of the provinces where anti-Ahok and pro-Ahok demonstrations were held between September 2016 and May 2017, based on reports in various online regional news websites. There are no reports of anti-Ahok demonstrations in Banten, the province west of Jakarta, but this is because the protesters opted to join the rallies in Jakarta. Source: Map modified for clarity by Willa Davis. The original map can be found at GeoCurrents.info.

the governor fire one of his officials who had circulated a call for clerics not to join the anti-Ahok rally.¹⁹ Elsewhere, in West Kalimantan, after the Christian governor publicly told FPI's leader to stay away from the province, he had to visit Aceh where, in turn, he was told by the demonstrating crowd to leave Aceh.²⁰ The electoral turbulence in the capital could be felt in regions far from the center and threatened the unity of the nation.

Across the country, Chinese-Indonesians were reminded of the 1998 anti-Chinese riots, when Chinese-owned businesses were burned and looted, and Chinese-Indonesian women were systematically raped. Some wondered whether it would be repeated and were ready with escape plans.²¹ Although no anti-Ahok demonstration led to widespread attacks against the Chinese, it was clear that they still face discrimination. After the end of Suharto's rule, there has been a growing acceptance of the Chinese, yet Ahok's saga is a poignant reminder that Chinese-Indonesians are still perceived as being not quite fully "Indonesian," ethnically, religiously, and politically.²² Although there are no legal rules that prohibit Chinese-Indonesians from holding office, ingrained anti-Chinese sentiments and suspicions regarding their loyalty and motives continue to impede their political activities in Indonesia.²³

In the larger context of Indonesia's history, how should we understand this episode? Is this a one-off case, the first cracks toward the breakdown of a society or, on the contrary, the surfacing of old-time discontent? Tracing Indonesia's historical and political course, it is reasonable to argue that this is an instance of the latter. In the early years of nation-building, one of the main efforts to make the new nation-state as inclusive as possible was to establish a nation that was religious without privileging any single religion, including that of the majority, i.e., Islam.²⁴ This stance created dissent, as some had envisioned a more overtly Islamic Indonesia.²⁵ The discontent materialized in a number of militant organizations in the 1950s and 1960s, like Darul Islam (House of Islam) and Tentara Islam Indonesia (Indonesian Islamic Army). Although Sukarno, the first president, managed to disarm these insurgencies, and Suharto, his successor who was in power for thirty-three years, strongly suppressed religious movements with anti-regime potential, the narrative of a more Islamic Indonesia continued to quietly circulate.²⁶ The strong anti-Ahok movement could be seen as the latest embodiment of this old narrative.

In short, the significance of the election goes beyond how Jakarta will be governed in the next five years or the length of the term for governor-

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ship. Instead, it revisits fundamental questions regarding who is and is not an Indonesian, the relation between religion and the state, and the relation between majority and minority groups. It is thus sound to assume that success of religion-based populism in the 2017 gubernatorial election will have an impact on the future course of Indonesian politics.

The Future of Indonesian Politics

Baswedan was inaugurated on October 16th, 2017. A few months into Baswedan's rule over Jakarta, he continues to use the religion and ethnicity cards whenever deemed necessary. In one of his first speeches after inauguration, he provoked an uproar when he mentioned that the time has come for the pribumi ("indigenous") people to be the host on their own land after having been occupied for so long. His evoking of this colonial racial categorization implies that Chinese-Indonesians are not "real" Indonesians. Unsurprisingly, this is in line with how the conservative groups understand their victory. A few days before Baswedan's inauguration, a banner stating, "The election of Anies-Sandi [Sandi is the vice governor] is a symbol of the rise of Muslim natives" could be seen hanging on the sidewalk in front of the city hall. In different places in the city, similar banners started to appear bearing the phrase "the rise of Muslim indigenous people" with pictures of the governor and vice governor in the background. The banners have since been removed. These expressions suggest that this Islamic anti-Ahok movement does not want to replace the nation-state with a pan-Islamic entity, like, for instance, a caliphate. On the contrary, quite similar to the militant Islamic movements in the early years of independence, it seems to aim for a more Islamic Indonesia.

The gubernatorial election is significant in light of the upcoming simultaneous local elections in 2018 and the presidential election in 2019. In June 2018, seventeen provinces, thirty-nine municipalities, and 115 districts will hold elections. Given the proven effectiveness of religion-based populism during Jakarta's election, it is very reasonable to predict that it will be used again in the upcoming elections. Even in instances where all the competing candidates are Muslims, one could attack the other by depicting their opponents as not Muslim enough and/or too accommodative

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of non-Muslims. To be able to anticipate this, the Election Supervisory Board (BAWASLU) has identified five provinces that are considered prone to conflicts. Out of these five, one gubernatorial election that needs to be watched closely is that of West Java, the province bordering Jakarta that has long been considered the most intolerant province of Indonesia and the region that used to be the hotbed of the aforementioned Darul Islam and Tentara Islam Indonesia in the 1950s.²⁷ With almost forty-three million inhabitants, West Java is also the most populous province of the country, another factor that increases the risk for social conflict.²⁸

Aside from the concurrent regional elections in 2018, in 2019, Indonesia will hold its fourth democratic presidential election. Widodo, the current president, will almost certainly run for another term. He is widely seen to be politically and ideologically close to Ahok to the extent that the attack on the latter is often understood as an indirect attack against Widodo. Current polls show that the majority would still vote for Widodo, but worryingly, the second-most popular figure is Prabowo, who ran against Widodo in 2014 and whose party is behind Baswedan.²⁹ In any case, the ugly divisiveness of Jakarta's gubernatorial election that already reverberated across the archipelago will only be magnified should the 2019 presidential election inflame the same sort of populism. All in all, the next few years are crucial in determining whether Indonesia will move toward a pluralistic democracy or not. ■

NOTES

1. Marcus Mietzner, "Indonesia's Decentralization: The Rise of Local Identities and the Survival of the Nation-State," in *Regional Dynamics in a Decentralized Indonesia*, ed. Hal Hill (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2014).
2. Azyumardi Azra, a prominent scholar on Indonesian Muslims, called Indonesia one of the "bright spots," a term referring to Muslim countries where democracy has taken hold. See Azyumardi Azra, *Indonesia, Islam, and Democracy: Dynamics in a Global Context* (Jakarta: Equinox Publishing, 2006).
3. See *Hasil Sensus Penduduk 2010 Data Agregat Per Provinsi* (Population Census 2010 Aggregated Data for Each Province), on the *Badan Pusat Statistik* website, accessed April 3, 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/y9mt9cgm>.
4. The term *pribumi* is contentious; it stems from the race-based stratification implemented by the Dutch colonial government that categorized the population of the Dutch East Indies into three groups: the highest social status is given to Europeans, then the foreign Orientals (including Chinese and Arabs), and at the bottom are the natives, or *pribumi*.
5. Leo Suryadinata, "Chinese Indonesians in an Era of Globalization: Some Major Characteristics," in *Ethnic Chinese in Contemporary Indonesia*, ed. Leo Suryadinata (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008).
6. The Hakka is a Chinese-language community. It is one of the five major Chinese communities, along with Hokkien, Teochew, Canton, and Hainan, that has migrated from China and settled in many countries in Southeast Asia, including Indonesia. See Hermanto Lim and David Mead, *Chinese in Indonesia: A Background Study*, SIL Electronic Survey Report 2011-028, (March 2011), <https://tinyurl.com/yba8k9zn>.
7. According to the 2010 national census, Muslims make up 87.18 percent of the population, Protestants 6.96 percent, Catholics 2.91 percent, Hindus 1.69 percent, Buddhists 0.72 percent, and 0.05 percent adhere to Confucianism. In terms of ethnicity, the majority of Indonesians are Javanese (40.2 percent), while the Chinese make up 1.8 percent. All statistical data on religion and ethnicity in this article are taken from Akhsan Naim and Hendry Syaputra, "Kewarganegaraan, Suku Bangsa, Agama, dan Bahasa Sehari-hari Penduduk Indonesia," *Hasil Sensus Penduduk 2010* (Citizenship, Ethnicity, Religion, and Everyday Language of the Indonesian Population. Results of the Population Census 2010) on the *Badan Pusat Statistik* website at <https://tinyurl.com/yamkp3gn>.
8. "Basuki's City Hall Woes Deepen" *Jakarta Globe*, March 9, 2015, <https://tinyurl.com/yagvbx9>.
9. Deti Mega Purnamasari, "Ahok Enjoys Comfortable Gap in Electability Poll," *Jakarta Globe*, June 20, 2016, <https://tinyurl.com/ybrqox2t>.
10. For more on Prabowo Subianto's political ambitions and how his actions have, at various points, threatened Indonesia's democracy, see Edward Aspinall, "Oligarchic Populism: Prabowo Subianto's Challenge to Indonesian Democracy," *Indonesia* 99 (2015): 1-28.
11. Callistasia Anggun Wijaya, "Ahok's Speech Not Blasphemous: Expert" *The Jakarta Post*, March 21, 2017, <http://tinyurl.com/yamw8dv3>.

12. Some examples of how “212” continues to be used: A 212 cooperative has been established that helps its members open mini-markets that adhere to the business principles as regulated by Shariah Law. Also, on the 12th of December, 2017, a “reunion” of the participants of the original 212 demonstration was held.
13. Reza Gunadha and Dwi Bowo Raharjo, “Resmikan RPTRA Kalijodo, Ahok: Ini Bukan Milik Sinarmas! (Inaugurating the Community Center at Kalijodo, Ahok: This Is Not Sinarmas!),” *Suara*, last modified February 22, 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/yb8fbbvx>.
14. “Pilkada Provinsi DKI Jakarta (Putaran Pertama) (Regional Election of DKI Jakarta First Round),” *Komisi Pemilihan Umum*, accessed December 22, 2017, https://pilkada2017.kpu.go.id/hasil/t1/dki_jakarta.
15. “Pilkada Provinsi DKI Jakarta (Putaran Kedua) (Regional Election of DKI Jakarta Second Round),” *Komisi Pemilihan Umum*, accessed December 22, 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/lvugho4>.
16. “Exit Poll Pilgub DKI Jakarta Putaran ke-2 (Exit Poll of the Gubernatorial Election in Jakarta, 2nd Round),” *Indikator Politik Indonesia*, last modified April 19, 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/y8qascl6>.
17. “Aksi Demo Damai Jika Tak Jadi Gubernur DKI, Ahok Jadi Presiden di Papua (Peaceful Demonstration, If He Can’t Be the Governor of DKI, Ahok Can Be the President of Papua),” *Media Papua*, last modified November 17, 2016, <https://tinyurl.com/y7n6w6qj>.
18. Rangga Baskoro, “Foto: Bendera GAM Mengancam NKRI Karenanya Disita Oleh Polisi (Photo: GAM Flag Threatens NKRI, Confiscated by Police),” *Tribunnews*, November 4, 2016, <https://tinyurl.com/y8quaax3>.
19. Apriadi Gunawan, “N. Sumatra Governor Fires Official After Intimidation from Angry Anti-Ahok Crowd,” *The Jakarta Post*, December 2, 2016, <https://tinyurl.com/ya8jnxv8>.
20. Hotli Simanjuntak and Severianus Endi, “Calls for Tolerance Spark Controversy in Aceh,” *The Jakarta Post*, May 8, 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/y7w9nkxs>.
21. “Bagaimana Warga Keturunan Cina Menanggapi Vonis Ahok? (How Do Chinese-Indonesians Deal with Ahok’s Conviction?),” *BBC*, May 10, 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/y82xtpov>.
22. After the fall of Suharto, Indonesia seemed to be more accepting of Chinese-Indonesians. The assimilation laws that had forced them to erase their cultural identities were abolished, the number of Chinese-Indonesian organizations grew, and Mandarin-language newspapers and programs started to be aired.
23. For a concise historical overview of the roles of Chinese-Indonesians in politics, see Thung Ju Lan, “Chinese-Indonesians in Local Politics: A Review Essay,” in *Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia* 11 (2009), <https://tinyurl.com/y7c6zw84>.
24. Indonesia is a religious state in the sense that the state regulates religious matters, unlike in a secular nation where religion is separated from the state. The Indonesian Constitution decrees that the state is based on the belief in one God and that every citizen is guaranteed the right to practice their chosen religion, although only six major world religions are acknowledged and half of these are not even monotheistic (Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and most recently, and clearly indicating an effort to be more inclusive, also Confucianism). Many Indonesians find it normal that their identity cards include information about the religion of the citizen, that religion is part of the national curriculum, and that seemingly irrelevant matters—like opening a bank account—require them to identify their religion. While legally all six religions are supposed to be treated equally, this is not always reflected in daily practices. Non-Sunni Muslims and other religious groups are sometimes subjected to abuses and other forms of persecution.
25. Joseph Chinyong Liow, *Religion and Nationalism in Southeast Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 177–180.
26. Paul Carnegie, “Countering the (Re-)Production of Militancy in Indonesia: Between Coercion and Persuasion,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no 5 (2015): 15–26.
27. “West Java Is Most Intolerant Province: Komnas HAM,” *The Jakarta Post*, July 1, 2016, <https://tinyurl.com/yb8445da>.
28. See endnote 3.
29. The competition between Ahok and Baswedan for governorship is often publicly understood as a proxy attack by Prabowo to Widodo in preparation for the 2019 presidential election.

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