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## Policy Paper

### Normalising Intolerance: Elections, Religion and Everyday Life in Indonesia

Dr Sandra Hamid



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# NORMALISING INTOLERANCE: ELECTIONS, RELIGION AND EVERYDAY LIFE IN INDONESIA

## ABSTRACT

*Indonesia was built on the premise of pluralism, as enshrined in the state ideology, Pancasila but tension over the relationship between religion and the state has always been present. Recently, 'othering' along primordial lines became a prominent part of political and social discourse. During the 2017 Jakarta elections, the country saw divisive public debates and mobilisation, anchored in the intersection of politics and faith, driven by intolerance and primordialism. Having ignored the issue for decades, most Indonesians were caught off-guard. Why did this happen, and what does it mean for Indonesian democracy? In this paper, Dr Hamid looks at the every-day lives of Indonesians and asks what has allowed religious intolerance to take centre stage?*

## DR SANDRA HAMID



Dr Sandra Hamid is The Asia Foundation's country representative to Indonesia. A cultural anthropologist and development specialist with interests in political participation and civil society, Sandra has twenty years' experience as a journalist, researcher, and development professional. With the Foundation, she has designed and implemented programs in the areas of political participation, knowledge and policy, governance, gender, law, and religious freedom. She also has extensive political experience, having served in one of the first political parties formed immediately after Soeharto's resignation. A Draper Hills Summer Fellow on Democracy and Development at Stanford University, Sandra is also a former Fulbright Visiting Student grantee. She completed her PhD from University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana.

# NORMALISING INTOLERANCE: ELECTIONS, RELIGION AND EVERYDAY LIFE IN INDONESIA<sup>1</sup>

DR SANDRA HAMID

Many observers were shocked by the strong religious tone of the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election, which reverberated across the country. Religious hard-liners had long protested against Basuki 'Ahok' Tjahaja Purnama, the capital's ethnic Chinese, non-Muslim governor. He had made careless comments on the campaign trail about the opposition's use of a Qur'anic verse to argue Muslims could not vote for him. This resulted in the largest mass demonstrations in decades, with hundreds of thousands of Muslim protesters turning out to 'defend Islam', demanding that Ahok be prosecuted for allegedly offending their religion. While not totally unprecedented, the use of religion in the 2017 Jakarta campaign occurred on a scale never seen before in the world's third largest democracy. Despite a 70 per cent approval rating close to the elections, Ahok lost in a landslide. Within a few weeks he was tried, convicted and imprisoned for two years for blasphemy.

These events should be understood in the broader context of the decades-long trend in Indonesia towards exclusivism in the practice of religion in the private and public spheres, the so-called 'conservative turn' of the Indonesian Muslim community (Van Bruinessen, 2013). This paper argues that the intolerant narratives that dominated the Jakarta election were an amplification of what many ordinary Indonesians were already experiencing in their lives.

To shed light on the connection between a growth in personal and public piety and the conduct of electoral politics, this paper focuses on the social dimensions of Indonesian life relevant to the elections, adding cultural context to other analyses based on polling data. I reflect upon the daily experience of Muslims, what they consume and are exposed to, and how these may contribute to shaping their outlook. Following Van Bruinessen, I argue that in the turn to conservatism, 'othering' has sharpened and this has allowed for the normalisation of intolerance in everyday life and, subsequently, electoral politics.

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## BETWEEN ELECTIONS: HIGHLIGHTING DIFFERENCE IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

In the months since the Jakarta election, interpretations of how the new governor, Anies Baswedan, was able to topple a once highly popular governor have fallen into two camps. Wilson (2017) focuses on issues of class and economic marginalisation, arguing these played a more important role in the outcome of the elections than the role of religious identity politics and the trumped-up blasphemy charge. Meitzner and Muhtadi (2017), by contrast, claim primordial politics was the deciding factor, although they acknowledge that economic disparity was also a factor.<sup>2</sup> Seemingly disproving class-based analyses, Warburton and Gammon (2017) used exit poll data from Indikator Politik Indonesia to demonstrate that Muslims were far more likely to vote against Ahok, regardless of their income or education levels.

Given that efforts to use Islam in past elections had been largely ineffective, it is important to examine how and why religion was such an important factor this time. A better understanding of voter behaviour is required. Analysis of constituents' everyday lives in the period between elections can provide some insight. The groundwork for this recent transformation lies in an incremental process of increasing Islamic exclusivism that has occurred in Indonesia over the past decade or two (Fealy and White, 2008; Van Bruinessen, 2013). The trend is consistent with a commoditisation of religion and a deepening movement towards public expressions of piety. It is evident in the spread of *shari'a* banking, in education, fashion, media, entertainment and even *halal* tourism. This social transformation has had consequences for majoritarian politics, as the 2017 Jakarta election demonstrated.

The first section of this paper therefore looks at religion in popular culture, specifically how Islam is taught, by who, in that sphere. The latter part of the paper offers some anecdotal accounts of the impact of this. This provides the context for the messages delivered as part of the 2017 gubernatorial election.

### THE RISE OF INSTANT PREACHERS

This section looks at cultural production on television and the big screen. On television, there is a constant diet of religious TV series and shows that provide a platform for preachers. These cultural products are an abstraction and a hyper-real version of the dominant culture.<sup>3</sup> In Geertz's terms, they are a model of, and a model for, society (Geertz, 1976) and, over the past decade they have helped shape discourse on, and

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2 An informative debate between Ian Wilson and Marcus Mietzner on the Jakarta gubernatorial elections was hosted by Asia Research Centre of Murdoch University on 27 April 2017, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p8r778g1Y2c>>.

3 Possami (2007) was influential in using this term to discuss the intersection between religion and popular culture, although his discussion was more focused on Christianity.

expressions of, what it means to be Muslim.

Religion is generally conveyed on television and in popular films in a binary manner, with a clear distinction between 'good' and 'bad' Muslims. There is little or no nuance or room for reflection. This dichotomy encourages the performative aspects of being religious, and perpetuates othering of those who are 'different' and therefore 'wrong'. It has helped to determine what is, and what is not, acceptable in everyday discourse. Drawing a line between 'us and them' is not only normalised but for some is seen to be a duty, a way of expressing personal commitment to piety and the empowerment of Muslims.

Public sermons have traditionally been the most popular medium for 'producing, disseminating, and consuming Islamic ideas' (Muzakki, 2008: 207). Through public sermons, ordinary Muslims – those who are not trained in Islamic studies – learned about Islam.

While there is nothing new about this method of transmission, in recent years the channels and format of the messaging has changed. In compulsory rituals, such as Friday prayers, the context and form generally remains the same. Preachers in Friday prayers are assured of an audience because these prayers - and listening to the Friday sermon, or *khutbah* - are obligatory. But using new media for preaching, such as television, requires different techniques, and has changed the nature of the conversation. On television, competition to attract an audience is intensified. Examining the narratives of preachers and, in particular, the new 'instant preachers' who appear on television may therefore shed light on the preferences of voters – and, in turn, how constituents are shaped by the religious narratives they consume.

One of the most important differences between preachers of the 1970s-1990s and contemporary preachers is their educational background (Muzzaki, 2008). Many of the preachers in the earlier period had formal Islamic education – academic and traditional education in *pesantren* or *madrasah*. In contrast, many popular contemporary preachers have little formal training. Up to the early 1990s, most leading preachers had lived the life of a *santri*, that is, they lived with their teachers and studied in conventional Islamic boarding school environments. Beyond teaching students to memorise religious texts, these schools have a long tradition of exploring and interpreting Islamic jurisprudence, or *usul fiqh*. Students in these schools are trained to use reason and to see and explore ambiguities. They discuss complex issues, such as marriage or coming of age, from the perspectives of the four main schools of thought in Islam (Hambali, Syafii, Hanafi, and Maliki). Students are exposed to a broad variety of literature, covering science, *fiqh*, doctrine, Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsir*), morality and mysticism, Islamic history, and, through extra-curricular study, subjects like ritual and magic (Bruinessen, 1990: 226-69). They have solid foundations to encourage *ijtihad*, or independent reasoning. Many 'instant preachers' lack this background.

There is, of course, no guarantee that graduates of Islamic boarding schools will always

be open-minded or inclusive in their outlook. Many other aspects contribute to this, chief among them being the social network to which graduates are later linked, according to Husni Mubarak, a graduate of the prominent Darussalam *pesantren* in West Java. Mubarak is a researcher for the Paramadina Centre for the Study of Religion and Democracy (Pusad Paramadina) and a supporter of inclusive Islam. Mubarak points out that while Darussalam produced him, it also produced Aman Abdurrahman, the main ideologue of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in Indonesia.

In other words, although *pesantren* can provide students with a strong foundation in knowledge and interpretation of Islamic texts, what they do after they secure such knowledge varies. Many become champions of religious tolerance, while some others do become hardliners.<sup>4</sup>

On television, classical preaching techniques have proven less engaging. Aside from a few exceptions, the preachers who have shot to stardom over recent years have not had the same traditional *pesantren* backgrounds as their predecessors.<sup>5</sup> Further, for the most part, these new preachers are not associated with either of the two main mass-based Muslim organisations, Nahadhatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah. For many traditional preachers, these two organisations served as launching pads to broader prominence but the ‘instant preachers’ have television as their launching pad.

With a growing market for Islamic lifestyle products, a few television stations began providing more air time for Islamic programs and sermons. This market has continued to grow and now programs featuring preachers can be found on almost all stations. This has, in turn, made the competition for the Muslim market more intense. The ability of preachers to capture an audience has become critical to maintaining market share and profits.

On television, preachers encounter the main constraint faced by all TV programs: time. Successful preachers have mastered the ability to offer simple answers to religious questions. Questions asked by viewers are typically wide ranging – for example, on one show a widowed woman who had remarried asked which spouse she would be reunited with in the afterlife; others asked whether taking selfies is allowed, whether it is acceptable to work in an insurance company, and, most important for the 2017 elections, whether it is acceptable for Muslims to have a non-Muslim leader. These are all understandable questions. While these questions can be answered from various angles using different perspectives in Islamic thought, popular preachers offer simplified

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- 4 Interview with Husni Mubarak, April 2017. Mubarak was a student in Darussalam boarding school between 1998 to 2001. The boarding school is equivalent to high school and upon graduating he continued his education in the Syarif Hidayatullah Islamic State University, of Jakarta.
  - 5 Zainuddin MZ and Iskandar SQ are examples of the old-school preachers. Abdullah Gymnastiar, Eko Patrio, and Mamah Dedeh exemplify the new breed of preachers.

answers. Answers are black or white - forbidden or allowed – and are provided in an entertaining, simplistic and authoritative way. Although their answers may be simplistic, these preachers have a vast reach in the population, and can have a major impact on local and national politics.

In fact, many religious leaders from both NU and Muhammadiyah have become concerned that they are losing the popularity contest against instant preachers. According to Najib Burhani, a Muhammadiyah scholar, traditional figures of religious authority are 'no longer the main references' for those who are looking for quick and easy answers or the difference between right and wrong (Burhani, 2016: 15-29).

Akhmad Sahal, an Islamic scholar from NU, offers a similarly sobering response to the issue, lamenting that at the end of the day people just want simple answers about whether an issue is allowed in Islam:<sup>6</sup> 'Is it *haram* or not?' For scholars to remain relevant, Sahal argues, they are forced to cater this need.

Yet many Islamic scholars remain opposed to offering easy answers. They are against teaching Islam in what Muzakki calls 'a simple manual form'. Hussein Muhammad, a prominent NU scholar and former member of the National Commission on Violence Against Women (Komnas Perempuan), says that doing so would be 'to contribute to the culture of stupidity' among believers.<sup>7</sup> Religious leaders, according to Hussein, should be encouraging people 'to think for themselves'. A new balance between the need to educate and the pressure to provide short-cut answers is urgently needed, he claims.

While NU and Muhammadiyah-affiliated scholars ponder these issues and look for a solution, the 'instant preachers' with their simple messages secured their followings long ago. As a result, their messages – and their methods of delivering them – have set the tone of public discourse and helped to inform the decisions that Muslims make in their everyday lives, and in political moments such as the 2017 Jakarta election. For example, in the rallies leading up to the Jakarta election, popular television figures systematically used formerly inflammatory words, such as *kafir* (non-Muslim), to refer to the incumbent. In the past it was unusual to hear this term used in public conversation at all, as it had been considered offensive. Now it has become a common part of public discourse, creating unease in everyday social relations and, at times, tensions, as will be shown later. The term has become not only normalised but even valorised.

Members of the two main Muslim organisations, Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama, are aware of the risk this poses to social cohesion, and have expressed concern over the trend toward exclusivism in the practice of religion and in its divisive expression in

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6 Interview with Akhmad Sahal, March 2017.

7 Interview with Hussein Muhammad, March 2017.

the public sphere.<sup>8</sup> Neither NU nor Muhammadiyah have, however, been able to create a unified response to recent political developments. Calls from the leaders of both organisations for their followers not to join the mass rallies of 2016 went unheeded, and ‘fell on deaf ears’ (Burhani: 2016). In fact, a great many NU and Muhammadiyah members proudly participated in the rallies, including former Muhammadiyah chairman Amien Rais.

Instant preachers, by contrast, have captivated their viewers with their political relevance, media savvy, and highly-polished communication skills. They have been able to ‘transform themselves to become a new breed of *santri*’ (Muzzaki, 2008: 207). Having successfully positioned themselves as key individuals in the Indonesian political landscape, they have been able to inject their brand of religious discourse into the Muslim public sphere. They provide models of what they see as acceptable in everyday conduct. It is difficult to underestimate the nature and scale of this transformation, although its cumulative long-term results remain to be seen.

### MUSLIM SOAP OPERAS AND ‘PIETY FILMS’

Narratives in Islamic movies and TV shows can serve as a proxy of what most people consider the expressions, idioms, or symbols of Islam – from garb to rhetoric.

The rise of religious soap operas (so-called *sinetron religi*) began in earnest in 2004. Since then they have become among the most popular forms of programs on TV (Nazarudin 2009). This is part of a trend that started earlier in other forms, namely books, magazines and fashion.

To some, the growth in Islamic products cannot be separated from the ‘moral panic’ caused by the flood of ‘sensational and sensual’ products in those spheres (Widodo, 2008). There is, however, another factor that cannot be underestimated – consumer demand and the profits that can be made by catering to this market. Islamic products are profitable and TV programs promoting Islamic values record among the highest ratings. Muslim-oriented films consistently perform well at the box office (Nazaruddin, op cit). In other words, this is more than a simple ethical response to perceived threats to Islamic values from liberalism and pluralism. The rising tide of ‘conservative Islam’ offers a plethora of business opportunities.

At the same time, to safeguard their bottom line, producers do their utmost to avoid becoming the target of protests by hardline groups such as the FPI. Claiming that it is ‘defending Islamic morality’, FPI has sometimes called for particular films, television shows and performances to be modified or stopped altogether. At times, they have used force to achieve this. Art shows have also, on occasion, been the target of

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8 For instance, see Aritonang (2017)’s discussion of Quraish Shihab and Mustofa Bisri’s televised discussion on the popular *Mata Najwa* talk show.

demonstrations for being un-Islamic or supposedly offensive (Pausacker, 2016; Hamid, 2012).

Looking at successful programs provides insight into the kind of cultural products that hardliners like the FPI consider acceptable and, more importantly, what the market finds desirable. Nazaruddin has dissected several episodes of Islamic TV programs, namely *Kuasa Allah* (God's Power), *Rahasia Illahi* (God's Secret), *Kusebut NamaMu* (I say Your Name), *Pintu Hidayah* (The gate to Enlightenment), and *Astaghfirullah* (Arabic: Forgive me, God). In these programs, non-Muslim antagonists do not wear any noticeably 'Muslim' clothing and do not perform any rituals or behaviour that would suggest they are pious. They are typically impatient and many are damned. The programs often show the death of 'bad' characters, graphically, demonstrating the wrath of God. 'Good' characters, meanwhile, have the opposite traits: they are pious Muslims, perform rituals and wear clothing considered 'Islamic' in Indonesia, such as headscarves.

While these narratives are simplistic, these programs deal with adult issues of marriage, deception, and death. Simplicity is the rule and therefore it is hardly surprising that these programs reinforce dichotomies. This binary representation of characters strips human beings of any complexity once they are presented as 'pious'.

In Muslim-themed movies, piety is constantly on display, with numerous shots of 'good' characters performing their religiosity. The characters and plots in these movies are often black and white. Producers are responsible for dissuading directors from presenting complexities in a supposedly Muslim character. One movie director commented, for example, that 'You cannot introduce negative qualities to a character who the audience would assume to be a Muslim'.<sup>9</sup>

Over time, an expectation has developed that directors and writers should be 'respectful' of characters who are considered to represent religious authority in movies as well. A famous book-turned-film, *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* (Woman with a Turban), which features a woman's struggle for justice and freedom to love, demonstrates this (Sasono, 2012: 69). The main character, who is wilful and, at the same time, pious, is representative of many Muslim women and the dilemmas they face in real life. The movie was applauded by many as an honest depiction of women's experiences but the head preacher of Istiqlal Mosque, the largest mosque in the country, condemned it because 'it misrepresents the *ulema* ... [and] delivers a bad image of Islam' (Sasono, 2012: 64).

Similarly, in 2011 the influential and conservative Indonesian Council of Ulama (Majelis Ulama Indonesia, MUI) criticised the film *Tanda Tanya* (Question Mark), which explores sensitive issues like polygamy and pluralism. Following its release, pressure from the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) eventually caused SCTV to pull the plug on a planned

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9 Personal communication with anonymous film director, February 2017.

screening of the film (Hoesterey and Clark, 2012: 207-26).

Backed by statements from MUI, groups such as FPI are able to impose their version of what constitutes acceptable Islamic television programs and movies. In this context, the space for complex representations of piety and wilfulness in women, reasoning and critically questioning difficult issues, is shrinking. To survive, movies and television programs must deliver straightforward messages about the goodness of *ulama* and other Muslim characters. The narrative presents what Muslims *should* be – and not the many possibilities of what they might be.

The bottom line is that the decisions made by the MUI, in concert with the actions of the FPI, decide what ordinary Muslims have available on their screens and in their homes. They are the filter for what audiences get to consume. Producers for the most part obey the moral and political message, and the market absorbs it. It is in this context that the rise of FPI as a potent political force should be understood – similarly, the increasing power of MUI.

It is important to remember that all these forms and forces reinforce one another. Given the right circumstances, they can be extremely effective in dominating public discourse. In 2017, this convergence of interests empowered exclusivist Muslims. This saw groups such as FPI targeting their online critics offline, forcing them to make public apologies, or pushing the police to bring them in for questioning. The language and actions of these groups around election time pushed the boundaries of what was formerly acceptable in the social and political spheres.

## IDENTITY POLITICS EXPERIENCED

Moving on from the normalisation of binaries as a result of instant preachers and simplistic depictions of Islam on television and in movies, this section discusses acts of discrimination faced by both minorities and mainstream Indonesians.

Acts of discrimination may manifest in overt and sometimes more subtle ways. In the heated period following the 2017 Jakarta election, there was little room to counter acts of discrimination without being accused of being anti-Islam. This conservative stance appears to have solidified after a decade of ineffective responses to intimidation. The following personal narratives reveal a new phenomenon of social exclusion and discrimination that arguably marks a turning point in the imagined community of pluralistic Indonesia, as embodied in the state motto, *Bhinekka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity). These acts of discrimination are both informed by, and inform, the increasingly exclusive expressions of Islam described above. They play a pernicious and energising role in daily life and, during elections, in politics.

It is important to situate these less-documented personal stories in the context of broader intolerance toward religious and ethnic minorities in Indonesia. Over the past decade, Indonesia has seen steady, small-scale, intra-religious sectarian discrimination

and violence, directed particularly toward the Ahmadiyah and Shi'a Islamic sects, as well as other minority religious communities. This trend is well documented.<sup>10</sup>

Intolerant acts are discrimination operationalised. The case of the Ahmadiyah community illustrates this, and shows what it means to the everyday lives of a community over time. Ahmadis are a religious group who claim to be Muslims but whom most Sunni Muslims view as deviant. Despite having been present in Indonesia since even before the birth of the Republic, discrimination against Ahmadis strengthened after MUI published a fatwa in 2005 that stated unambiguously that Ahmadiyah is a deviant sect. A government decision followed, banning public prayer by Ahmadis.<sup>11</sup> This was accompanied by persecution of the community and a deadly attack in 2011.

While this community is now safer than it was in 2011 and the group has not been completely banned, neither are they welcome. Until recently, the 1,600 Ahmadiyah residents of Manislor village in Kuningan, West Java, for example, could not obtain legal identity documents. Local authorities refused to issue identity cards that stated they were Muslims, as they did not recognise them as legitimate fellow believers. This had been an irresolvable issue – no less than 20 advocacy groups had been involved in attempts to secure them this basic civil right. To be issued with new ID cards, local authorities required them to recite the *syahadah* and sign a form declaring that they were no longer members of the Indonesian Ahmadiyah Community (Jamah Ahmadiyah Indonesia, JAI).<sup>12</sup> While they were willing to recite the *syahadah* (the Muslim confession of faith) because they consider themselves Muslims, they were unwilling to sign the form. As Nurhalim, an Ahmadi community leader said: 'We can't say that we do not belong to JAI when we are Ahmadis'.<sup>13</sup>

This additional requirement is highly atypical of Indonesian state practice in recording citizens' information. Officials usually take a passive position and only record the data that citizens provide.<sup>14</sup> Yet in Manislor, local officials took the initiative to verify

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10 Recent key essays on the issue can be found in *Religion, Law and Intolerance in Indonesia* (Lindsey and Pausacker, 2016). See also Crouch, 2009 and Al-Fauzi et al, 2011.

11 Joint Decision of the Minister of Religion, the Attorney General and the Minister of Home Affairs, No 3 of 2008, KEP-033/A/JA/6/2008 and No 199 of 2008, 9 June 2008. See: Lindsey and Butt, 2016: 27-30.

12 Declaring *syahadah* is the first tenet of the five pillars of being Muslim. It is a statement that Allah is the only god and that Mohammad is his messenger. Asking an Ahmadi to make this declaration assumes that they are not Muslims.

13 Meeting with Ahmadis of Manis Lor, June 2016.

14 Febi Yonesta, a lawyer and religious freedom activist, has noted that the additional requirements applied to Ahmadis are not typical of the state's practice in recording citizens' information, as officials usually simply take a passive position, that is, they only record data

the information and sought guidance from the local MUI branch, which proposed that the government impose these additional requirements. The state, therefore, not only treated the Ahmadiyah community differently but also allowed a non-state institution to rule on an issue under the state's jurisdiction. This was a clear act of discrimination against the basic rights of citizens.

Inability to get an ID card makes accessing government services impossible but there is little incentive for politicians, officials or mainstream religious organisations to use their power to stop discrimination against so tiny a religious minority (Fealy, 2016: 123).

The Ahmadi case is an example of how intolerant views can lead to acts of discrimination by the state. These acts of discrimination have been documented by civil society organisations including the Wahid Institute, the Setara Institute for Democracy and Peace, the Centre for Religious and Cross-Cultural Studies (CRCS) at Gadjah Mada University (UGM), and the Paramadina Centre for the Study of Religion and Democracy (PUSAD), as well as the Lembaga Survey Indonesia (LSI). Taken together, the collected reports of these organisations provide a comprehensive picture of religious intolerance and discrimination driven by a climate of rising Muslim exclusivism.

## HOW RELATIONSHIPS HAVE CHANGED: PERSONAL ACCOUNTS

Everyday, non-violent acts of intolerance rarely make it into civil society reports on intolerance but the constant background small-scale acts contributes to shaping the broader discriminatory narrative, which grows out of an exclusive outlook and sense of superiority. It would therefore be a mistake to separate openly-manifested acts of intolerance from the low-level intimidation that can alter personal and community relations. The stories presented below show how everyday social relations can echo what is taking place in the public sphere.<sup>15</sup>

I begin with a cluster of stories demonstrating changing relationships in neighbourhoods. The first comes from a mixed neighbourhood in a suburb of Jakarta, where a group of neighbours meets every month, rotating from house to another, in an *arisan* gathering.<sup>16</sup> A non-Muslim resident decided to leave the group because neighbours were no longer willing to visit her house for the monthly gathering, over concerns that her house was not *halal*. According to the woman concerned, there was no discussion leading up the other members' decision to refuse to visit her house. This *arisan* had taken place for

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provided by citizens.

- 15 These stories came from persons who were either personally involved, or know the person whose stories were conveyed to me. To maintain their anonymity no names are presented here.
- 16 *Arisan* is a common form of socialising in Jakarta, as in other parts of Indonesia. The scale of the event and the type of food served depends on the wealth of the *arisan* members.

more than a decade, and members were used to discussing such issues openly. But in this case, the non-Muslim member was not part of the discussion, and was only informed of the decision after the fact.

Another story from a neighbourhood in Central Java also shows how social relations are changing. Over the past three years, in a village outside Yogyakarta, non-Muslims were no longer invited to a village cleansing ritual usually held a month before Ramadhan. In this tradition, villagers would work together to clean the local cemeteries, regardless of their religion. The communal event would then be followed by a gathering, with a prayer and distribution of food.<sup>17</sup> During the prayer, Muslim members of the community would sit in the core circle, while the non-Muslims would sit on the outer ring. Everyone who was involved in the cleaning of the village attended. But over the past three years, the ritual has become a Muslim-only event. While the tradition never involved a formal invitation, families running the event would usually verbally invite their neighbours. When invitations were not forthcoming, the non-Muslim members of the community took it as a sign that they were no longer welcome.

Other stories of shifting social relations cluster around family affairs. Rifts between families have been recorded as different family members – all Muslims – are exposed to different teachings of Islam. Something as mundane as singing ‘Happy Birthday’ in a family party can now become a controversy. One family reported that they were scolded by their relatives and told not sing a ‘Christian song’. In another family, a 13-year-old girl was told by her cousin, whose parents had become more observant Muslims, not to be friends with non-Muslims, as it was undesirable in Islam. Other families recorded dramatic shifts in relations following the 2014 presidential election. One woman reported that one side of her family refused to help in preparations for, and did not attend, a wedding because she had supported Joko Widodo, who was considered ‘not good for Muslims’. While religious campaigning was not as extreme as the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election, the divisions sparked by the 2014 elections were enough to cause serious tension in this family.

There are numerous similar stories from the Jakarta election. One woman reported that a long-term friendship was ended because her friend refused to remain friends with a supporter of a ‘blasphemous person’. Several non-Muslims I spoke to also reported the liberal use of terms such as *kafir* in their social media circles have led them to decide not to be part of such social group anymore. During and following the Jakarta elections, the term continued to be used to refer to non-Muslims. Given the strong negative connotations associated with the term, many non-Muslims find it highly offensive – a position that liberal Muslim scholars support.<sup>18</sup> This has consequences for relationships

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17 A typical Javanese ritual of *slametan*, as described by Geertz in his seminal work *The Religion of Java* (Geertz, 1976: 11-16, 38-85).

18 See, for example Mubaadalah, 2016.

in real life that go well beyond social media.

Indonesia has also witnessed shifting practices in the ways in which Muslims conduct business. Following the ‘marketisation of Indonesian Islam’ (Fealy, 2008), many Muslims have stories of being encouraged by family members to only buy products from Muslim-owned businesses. One Jakarta-based member of a co-op, for example, decided to leave after being a member for a decade, because she believed that co-op practice was not in line with the requirements of a *shari’a*-based economy. Similarly, following the 2 December rally against Ahok, a short-lived movement to boycott franchise bakery Sari Roti sprung up, because it had released a statement publicly denying any association with the rally (Coconuts Jakarta, 2016).

These anecdotal stories contribute to a body of data on the everyday experience of shifting social relations caused by religious exclusivism. They add to other ethnographic work, for example in the education sector. The Centre for Religious and Cross-Cultural Studies at Gajah Mada University (UGM) has reported how state schools have issued policies restricting the behaviour and dress of girls, and non-Muslims. These rules are not always implemented by the school administration, and are often imposed by extra curricula groups. In some schools, female students are not allowed to sing or speak, as a woman’s voice is considered *aurat* (body parts to be covered, to prevent them sexually arousing men) (Wee, 2012: 35).

More recently, a report was released indicating discriminatory practices in the recruitment process for the government scholarship program, LPDP (Lembaga Pengelola Dana Pendidikan). Some candidates testified that they were subjected to questions about religion and morals (Pawestri, 2017).<sup>19</sup>

These narratives shared above are more than just stories, they are testimonies by witnesses.<sup>20</sup> To better understand the scale and the depth of the problem, we need to gather and analyse narratives of intolerance like these. They can enrich survey data, and provide ‘thick descriptions’ of a phenomenon (Geertz, 1973). At what point do intolerant narratives become ‘normal’, accepted, and change the everyday experience of communities? Has this already begun to happen in Indonesia?

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19 The survey was a limited one, instigated by feminist Tunggal Pawestri who, through her Twitter account, invited those who had experienced discrimination during the LPDP scholarship interview to share their stories.

20 As such it is ‘narrative research’: ‘a study that uses or analyzes narrative materials. The data can be collected as a story (a life story provided in an interview or a literary work) or in a different manner (field notes of an anthropologist who writes up his or her observations as a narrative or in personal letters)’ (Lieblich et al, 1998: 2).

## ELECTORAL POLITICS: FROM RELIGIOUS RHETORIC TO ACTION

This last section illustrates how religion was used in the past three elections in Jakarta: the 2012 gubernatorial elections, the 2014 presidential election, and the 2017 gubernatorial elections. These elections saw a steady increase in the use and intensity of religious language, eventually leading to mass protests. It is my argument that these widespread protests would not have taken place without the everyday normalisation of intolerance demonstrated above. Put differently, everyday events in between elections are informed by, as well as inform, electoral politics.

### RELIGION, POLITICS AND ELECTIONS

Paradoxically, one of the most serious challenges to democratic values in Indonesia has emerged from democracy's primary tool – elections. Needing the support of the majority, politicians have resorted to base-level appeals to primordial identity to garner the support of the majority, in a context where the rights of minorities are only poorly protected. This is a strategy to which Jakarta has been exposed with ever increasing intensity, peaking in 2017. One month before the second round of voting in the Jakarta gubernatorial elections, President Joko 'Jokowi' Widodo spoke out against the use of religion in elections, expressing concerns about frictions that had already emerged. 'We have to avoid this,' he said, and emphasised the importance of delineating 'what is about religion, and what is about politics' (Krisiandi, 2017).

Jokowi's statement provoked multiple reactions. Not long after the president's call, conservative Muslims launched a campaign using the hashtag #Indonesiamoveup. Their key argument is the normative explanation that 'Islam is complete, it regulates all aspects of life including politics ...' The post suggested that anyone who 'feared' implementing Islam in its totality was clearly afraid of having his or her interests, and those of his or her master, disrupted.<sup>21</sup>

The Minister of Religious Affairs, Lukman Hakim Saifuddin, meanwhile, was quick to defend the president, suggesting that Jokowi's aim was to 'remind all people to not mix what is bad in the process and goals of politics, and what is noble in the process and goal of religions.' in the same speech, Saifuddin also emphasised that the president mentioned that religion should be 'a tool to protect and nurture diversity, which is a gift from Allah' (Yulianto). Other politicians sat on the fence, like Zulkifli Hassan, head of the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR) and leader of the National Mandate Party (PAN). When asked to comment on the president's statement, Hassan's response was non-committal – this was predictable, given that former PAN leader Amien Rais was one of the main instigators of the mass rallies that soon followed (Prastiwi, 2017).

The role of religion in the Indonesian state has been debated since the dawn of the

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21 See <<https://www.instagram.com/p/BSPWJoYhnjS/>>.

Republic in 1945. The issue was ‘one of the most contentious issues debated among nationalist leaders at the time Independence was declared, and the Constitution promulgated’ (Lindsey and Butt, 2016: 43). Conservative Muslim groups have long demanded that ‘state law should be required to comply with Islamic law’ (Lindsey and Butt, 2016: 26). This argument has been made politically several times since the mid-1940s, but ‘it never had legal force in modern Indonesia’ (Lindsey and Butt, 2016: 26). The separation between religion and the Constitution has remained more or less intact. Nevertheless, since decentralisation in 2001, Indonesia has seen the passage of many religion-inspired bylaws, hundreds of which are discriminatory to women and minorities (Komnas Perempuan, 2016).

At the national level, Indonesia has also seen an increased use of the Blasphemy Law, (Law No 1/PNPS/1965 on the Prevention of Abuse and Defamation of Religion). Under the authoritarian New Order, this Law was used only ten times but in the democratic era, that is, since 1998, it has been used at least 120 times and it is often used against those whose religious practices and beliefs are ‘perceived to ‘deviate’ from the teachings of mainstream Islam’ (Crouch 2012). Efforts to turn the tide of blasphemy prosecutions have been far from successful. Politicians and the elite find the issue too controversial – at least on par with the issue of separation of state and religion.

As Indonesia heads toward its fourth direct presidential election, there are few signs of change. It can be safely assumed that, now that the precedent has been set (and proven effective) in the Jakarta elections, religion will continue to be a major factor in the upcoming 2019 presidential election.

This disturbing trend contrasts with Indonesia’s success in managing the technical aspects of its elections. In 2017, Freedom House gave Indonesia 11 out of 12 points for ‘electoral process’.<sup>22</sup> With almost 200 million registered voters, elections in the archipelago are among the most complicated in the world to organise – and consequently Indonesia’s success in executing them is an often-quoted indicator of the country’s commitment to democracy.

Indonesians generally trust elections and view them as credible. When results are contested, parties use the legal framework to settle matters. These five-yearly rituals, conducted in a generally free and fair manner, have allowed for the peaceful transition of power in Indonesia.

However, while the mechanics of electoral democracy have taken root, democratic values of equality and inclusion have yet to be strengthened. During campaign periods,

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22 See <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2017/indonesia>. Other scores were 14/16 for political pluralism and participation, and 6/12 for functioning of government. There were similar scores for 2016 and 2015, although in 2015, Indonesia only scored 10/12 for electoral process.

the majority (and the votes they carry) is all that counts. Jakarta politicians are not alone in using such a strategy. In their analysis testing Islam's 'political advantage' in 2012, Mujani et al concluded that like any voters around the world, Indonesians put economic wellbeing and safety as their top priorities. Indonesian voters may be religious, but 'Islamic piety does not entail support for political Islam' (Mujani et al, 2012: 297). This would seem to explain the results of the 2012 Jakarta election and the 2014 presidential election, when Jokowi and Ahok were elected Governor and Deputy Governor respectively, despite strong criticism from some conservative Muslim groups. But it does not explain the 2017 Jakarta election, when these conservative views prevailed against Ahok.

## 2012 AND 2014 ELECTIONS: GUBERNATORIAL AND PRESIDENTIAL RACES

In the 2012 gubernatorial election, Jokowi teamed up with Ahok to challenge incumbent Governor Fauzi Bowo. The nomination of Joko Widodo, then the highly popular mayor of the Central Java city of Solo, was a strategic decision. The mayor had captured the attention of many with his trademark impromptu visits to engage directly with the people – so-called *blusukan*. He was considered clean and efficient and a supporter of 'ordinary' Indonesians – he won much praise for standing up to the Central Java governor to stop a planned mall development going ahead. In short, selecting Jokowi to run in Jakarta was an easy choice. Nominating ethnic Chinese and non-Muslim Ahok as his running mate was riskier, however.

As expected, Ahok quickly became the target of religious attacks. The most vocal criticism of Ahok came from Rhoma Irama, a pop star turned preacher, who said it was *haram* to elect a non-Muslim as leader, and Fauzi Bowo's running mate, Nachrowi Ramli. Use of racist, anti-Chinese language was common, culminating in the circulation of a video warning of a repeat of the 1998 riot in which ethnic Chinese women became targets of sexual assault, if people voted for Ahok (Hosen, 2016: 187). These racist and anti-Christian tactics failed dismally, however, and Jokowi won easily, attracting 53.8 per cent of the vote to Fauzi Bowo's 46.2 per cent (Al Azhari, 2014).

Two years later, the same anti-Chinese rhetoric followed Jokowi to the 2014 presidential campaign. Some of the attacks continued to target Ahok – the narrative was that if Jokowi won the election, Ahok would take over (as indeed proved to be the case) and Jakarta would have an ethnic Chinese non-Muslim governor. For the most part, however, attacks also targeted Jokowi, with rumours circulating that he was secretly Chinese and Christian. Strangely, given that all candidates were Muslim, religion was a major part of the 2014 election. The focus of debate, however, was on which candidate was the 'better' Muslim.

Social media amplified these debates. The 2014 presidential election was the first in which social media was used heavily by both camps. For example, Jokowi's supporters campaigned using the hashtag #ogahdikubuli ('refuse to be duped'), comparing the

two candidates and their families along ethnic and religious lines. This campaign showed that Jokowi's mother and wife had both been on the pilgrimage to Mecca, while Prabowo's mother was a Christian of North Sulawesi and German ancestry. It also made the point that Jokowi's three siblings were Muslim, compared to Prabowo's three Christian siblings.<sup>23</sup> In other words, Jokowi's supporters also sought to configure the election as a contest of piety and purity.

Meanwhile, the so called 'black campaign' against Jokowi depicted him as being of Chinese descent and a covert non-Muslim. Jokowi's team tried to counter this campaign by spreading signals of his piety – among the most prominent being when Jokowi went on a minor pilgrimage to Mecca (*Umroh*) after the campaign period ended, before voting day. To his supporters, this might have proved his religiosity but to his opponents it was simply image management.

Similarly, Prabowo's camp aggressively mobilised Islamic organisations and symbols. Given that all Islamic parties, except the NU-affiliated National Awakening Party (PKB), supported Prabowo's nomination, this was not surprising. The intensity, however, was far greater than that voters had experienced in the past. At a rally in Yogyakarta ahead of the election, for example, Prabowo was dubbed 'Commander in Chief of the Islamic War' (*Panglima Perang Islam*). Following this bitter, polarised campaign, Jokowi attracted 53 per cent of the vote on election day. With that, the governor of Jakarta became the seventh president of Indonesia – and Ahok stepped into the governor's shoes.

## 2017 ELECTIONS: AHOK'S FIRST JAKARTA ELECTIONS

The 2017 gubernatorial election was the first time Ahok had contested the position directly. For Jakarta voters, this was also the first time that they were presented with a non-Muslim, ethnic Chinese as a candidate for the top job in the capital.<sup>24</sup> As discussed, during the 2012 campaign, when running as Jokowi's deputy, Ahok was already the target of anti-Chinese sentiment. It is hardly a surprise that Islamist groups objected to him replacing Jokowi and becoming governor. His swearing-in ceremony was held amid protests from FPI followers, who insisted they would not accept a non-Muslim governor.

It was therefore to be expected that religion would be used with increasing intensity in the 2017 campaign. However, there was a marked difference. Religion was not only part of campaign rhetoric but the campaign even entered the mosques. In one video that went viral several weeks before voting day, Eep Saefulah Fatah, one of the lead

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23 <<https://twitter.com/hashtag/OGAHDIKIBULI?src=hash>>.

24 Hendrik Hermanus Joel Ngantung, or Henk Ngantung, was the first Christian governor of Jakarta (from 1964-1965) but he was appointed, and not elected.

campaigners for Ahok's opponents, Anies Baswedan and Sandiaga Uno, spoke about the importance of using mosques to mobilise voters. He discussed the success of Algeria's Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) in using its network of mosques to win elections. FIS, he said, had mobilised preachers, particularly during Friday prayers, to encourage congregations to stand up for their rights, and rely only on themselves and 'leaders they trust'. In the video, Eep said he would like to see the same strategy used to defeat Ahok.

Indeed, mosques were widely used in the 2017 campaign to convey messages about the importance of voting for a Muslim candidate. Even in supposedly 'neutral' areas, such as university campuses, preachers repeated FPI's calls to 'defend Islam' and said that voting for the 'blasphemous' candidate would be sinful.

Around the same time, banners were erected at several Jakarta mosques stating that the mosques would not perform funeral rites for deceased people who supported a blasphemer. Some banners even used the word to refer to a dead animal (*bangke*) rather than the term for the body of a human (*mayat* or *jenazah*). The most widely reported victim of this strategy was a 78-year-old woman who had been open in her support for Ahok. When she died, her family members claimed that mosque leaders nearby had attempted to prevent the family from bringing her corpse to the mosque. When the issue went viral the mosque leader clarified that he had only 'suggested' that the body remain at the house because there was not enough time to bring the body to the mosque (Haryanto, 2017). In a deeply divided city, one group quickly took the mosque leader's explanation at face value, while the other group remained highly sceptical.

Supporters of the two candidates immediately began pointing fingers, accusing one another of capitalising on the death of an old woman. But the truth remained – many mosques had erected hateful banners discriminating against supporters of Ahok to block their access to an important ritual surrounding death, a ritual with extremely deep cultural and religious significance. Indonesian Muslim funerals bring communities together, and must be held less than 24 hours after death. After the community performs a prayer for the deceased, the preacher will usually ask the crowd three times if the deceased was a good person. When the congregation answers 'yes' (which they invariably do), this is believed to help the deceased in the afterlife. Everything about the ritual is very communal.

Robbing any family of this deeply significant communal process, simply because of political differences, is perhaps the best example of how politics has affected the lives of Jakarta residents. To many, this was the ultimate act of exclusion. It has very little, if any, precedent in past campaigns.<sup>25</sup>

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25 There is one similar incident recorded from 1955, documented by Geertz in Central Java. When a leftist party activist (also a Muslim) died after a divisive election, local religious leaders were hesitant about performing the prayer, and asked how to conduct prayer for a

Ahok lost the election by a significant margin. Some 58 per cent of Jakarta residents voted against the governor. Seemingly, voters found it important to vote for a 'governor from the majority religion'. Many were also convinced that 'Ahok was guilty of blasphemy' (Mietzner and Muhtadi, 2017). Barely two weeks after the elections, Ahok was, in fact, found guilty in the blasphemy case and given a sentence higher than the prosecutor had requested.

Sadly, the divides created by this election now seem permanent and some predict they will be carried forward to 2019 elections. A new norm has been established.

## CONCLUSION

The 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election penetrated deeper and further than any other recent elections. Since *Reformasi* began in 1998, Jakarta voters have never seen religion deployed in elections to this extent. This election entered houses of worship and leaked through school walls – previously forbidden places for political contest. This paper has tracked the shift from 2012 elections, to those in 2014, and later in 2017: from the use of religious narratives in campaigning, to organising voters and encouraging them to take action based on their beliefs. Before 2017, campaign messages targeted only the candidates; in 2017 they also targeted supporters of candidates. There is no recent parallel for the move of some mosques to refuse to perform funeral rites for supporters of a particular candidate. Such use of religious politics has taken Indonesia into new territory. Adding social media to the equation, the amplification of these issues was unprecedented.

Elections have allowed politicians to increasingly resort to base-level appeals to primordial identity to garner the support of the majority. Yet events in and around elections cannot be separated from the dynamics taking place between elections. This paper proposes that a growing sense of difference and exclusivism may help to explain why appeals to primordial identity were so successful.

For more than ten years, Indonesia has seen acts of discrimination against socially and religiously marginalised groups. At the same time, mainstream Muslims have become the target of the commodification of religiosity. Cultural products such as television preaching programs and soap operas are consumed daily and they offer simple binary messages. Most importantly, these binary messages have gone through a de facto 'vetting' process, with hardline (*garis keras*) groups using protests and sometimes violence to determine what is publicly acceptable. As has been repeatedly documented, officials and community members discriminate against the most marginalised in Indonesian society, such as the Ahmadiyah community, with little done to defend them.

Intolerance has thus become a daily reality for many Indonesians. The public sphere

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non-believer (Geertz, 1973).

has become increasingly captured by a monolithic, conservative and exclusivist understanding of what it means to be Muslim.

Intolerant acts often have their roots in an exclusive outlook. The conservative turn has strengthened a sense of in-group identity by emphasising difference. In educational settings, such teachings potentially create 'religio-centric' students who can see only truth among their own group, and only fault in other groups. There are many signs suggesting that intolerance is becoming a new normal. Indonesia has quite rightly attracted attention for its success in establishing robust democratic processes in the post-Soeharto period. The focus now should be on strengthening democratic values.

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