

Blasphemy, Politics, and Religion: The Case of Indonesia and Ahok

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Abstract

Thirty years ago, few in the West were much concerned about blasphemy restrictions which, while sometimes still on the statute books, were usually thought domestically and internationally to be only of historical interest. But, by the end of the twentieth, there were repeated eruptions of violence worldwide in reaction to blasphemy accusations, nearly all in the Muslim-majority world. Even comparatively moderate Indonesia has seen an increase in such accusations. This culminated in 2017 when Ahok, the incumbent governor of Jakarta and a Calvinist, was sentenced to two years imprisonment on trumped-up charges of blasphemy. His case and others show the degree to which blasphemy accusations have become political weapons.

Keywords

Ahok, blasphemy, Indonesia, Jokowi, insulting religion, politics

I. *The Resurgence of Blasphemy Accusations*

Around thirty years ago few in the West were much concerned about blasphemy restrictions which, while sometimes still on the statute books, were usually thought domestically and also abroad, to be only of historical interest.¹ That began to change when in 1989 the late Ayatollah Khomeini, then head of Iran's government, declared that it was the duty of every Muslim to kill Indian-born British-based writer Salman Rushdie on the grounds that his novel *The Satanic Verses* was blasphemous. Khomeini's edict triggered a wave of violence. Rushdie himself survived, but only at the cost of a hidden and protected life. Others connected with the book were not so fortunate. The novel's Japanese translator was assassinated, its Italian translator was stabbed, its Norwegian publisher was shot, thirty-five guests at a Turkish hotel hosting its Turkish publisher were burned to death in an arson attack. Khomeini's fatwa also inaugurated a worldwide movement to export blasphemy rules already suppressing religious minorities and Muslim dissenters in Muslim majority countries.

Subsequently, the early twenty-first century has seen repeated eruptions of violence worldwide in reaction to events such as Theo van Gogh's and Ayaan Hirsi Ali's feminist film *Submission*, the Danish and Swedish cartoons ostensibly of Islam's prophet Mohammed, Pope Benedict's Regensburg speech on reason and violence in religion, Geert Wilders's deliberately provocative film *Fitna*, and the cartoons in *Charlie Hebdo*, which led to the murder of most of its editorial staff. Now such matters are frequently in the news. Some events, such as the declaration by Terry Jones, a deservedly obscure Florida pastor with a congregation of less than fifty, that he would burn a Qur'an during prime time on September 11, 2010, achieved a perfect media storm. It combined Muslim outrage at desecration of the Qur'an with American self-promotion and publicity seeking, together with the voracious demands of 24-hour news coverage. The result dominated several news cycles and managed to draw in the American president, as well as senior United States military leaders and cabinet officials. And dozens of people were killed.

¹ The following two sections draw on Paul Marshall and Nina Shea, *Silenced: How Apostasy and Blasphemy Codes Are Choking Freedom Worldwide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

II. *Manipulation by Governments*

The international attention to these events has led to an impression that campaigns against “insulting Islam” and kindred offenses are mainly a matter of callous cartoonists and provocative pastors. Such impressions are misleading and provide only a small hint of the full, terrifying implications of such accusations. In fact, contemporary violence in response to purported religious insults is not simply the spontaneous expression of outraged religious sentiments but is often carefully stoked and channeled by politicians and governments, usually authoritarian ones straining for political advantage. And the objects and victims of such accusations are not usually insensitive Westerners but religious minorities and Muslim dissidents.

Accusations of blasphemy or insulting Islam are currently used systematically in much of the Muslim world to silence religious minorities, authors, and courageous journalists and democracy activists, including the region’s Nobel Prize winners. Muslim reformers who question repressive interpretations of Islam may be jailed for “insulting Islam” or “mocking religion,” or threatened, even killed, by mobs, vigilantes, and terrorists, simply for advocating an Islam of freedom.

The famous “Danish cartoons” of Mohammed were published in Denmark’s largest newspaper, *Jyllands-Posten*, in September 2005. Subsequently, some were reproduced in several Muslim countries by newspapers that printed them in order to criticize them. There was no violent response. It was only after the December 2005 summit of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (now named the Organization of Islamic Cooperation) in Saudi Arabia, which was initially convened to discuss sectarian violence and terrorism but instead focused on the cartoons and urged its member states to rouse opposition to Denmark, that violence erupted. In February 2006, that is *five months* after the caricatures were published, many Muslims across Africa, Asia, and the Mideast set out from Friday prayers for often violent demonstrations, killing over 200 people, mostly Christians in Nigeria.

Similar manipulation of news and feelings occurred with other international blasphemy incidents. Campaigns against “insults to Islam” are not simply eruptions of outraged religious feeling; they also reflect political manipulation of these feelings. This does not mean that the outrage felt by ordinary Muslims when their beliefs and symbols are criticized, mocked, or besmirched is not real—after all, governments cannot manipulate religious feelings unless there are religious feelings there to manipulate—but it does mean that responses to purported insult are usually politically channeled.

Iran, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia are more repressive on matters of purported blasphemy, but it is troubling that comparatively moderate Indonesia has seen an increase in such accusations. These culminated in 2017 when Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, generally known as Ahok, the incumbent governor of Jakarta, the capital, was sentenced to two years imprisonment on trumped-up charges of blasphemy.

III. *Blasphemy in Indonesia*

Indonesia's 1945 Constitution guarantees religious freedom, but on January 27, 1965, then-President Sukarno issued a presidential decree on religious abuse or defamation.² In 1966, this provision was incorporated as Article 156 (a) of the Indonesian Criminal Code in section V of crimes against public order.³

Article 1 of this law prohibits individuals from deviation (*penyimpangan*) from an officially recognized religion, and Article 4 prohibits defamation (*penodaan*) of these religions.⁴ Most blasphemy cases have been brought under Article 4, which stipulates

a maximum imprisonment of five years ... for whosoever in public deliberately expresses their feelings or engages in actions that: a. in principle is hostile and considered as abuse or defamation of a religion embraced in Indonesia; b. has the intention that a person should not practice any religion at all that is based on belief in Almighty God.⁵

² Presidential Decree No.1/PNPS/1965.

³ The original Indonesian version is "Penetapan Presiden Republik Indonesia Nomor 1/PNPS Tahun 1965 tentang Pencegahan Penyalahgunaan Dan/Atau Penodaan Agama." For a good overview, see "Prosecuting Beliefs: Indonesia's Blasphemy Laws," *Amnesty International*, November 2014, https://www.amnestyusa.org/files/_index_asa_210182014.pdf. More detailed treatments are given in Melissa A. Crouch, "Law and Religion in Indonesia: The Constitutional Court and the Blasphemy Law," *Asian Journal of Comparative Law* 7.1 (2012): 1–46, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/asian-journal-of-comparative-law/article/law-and-religion-in-indonesia-the-constitutional-court-and-the-blasphemy-law/E477329245DBCD94E688163F6CDE6F3B>; Zainal Abidin Bagir, "Defamation of Religion Law in Post-Reformasi Indonesia: Is Revision Possible?," *Australian Journal of Asian Law* 13.2 (2013): 1–16, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2228476.

⁴ Article 1 states, "Every individual is prohibited in public from intentionally conveying, endorsing or attempting to gain public support in the interpretation of a certain religion embraced by the people of Indonesia or undertaking religious based activities that resemble the religious activities of the religion in question, where such interpretation and activities are in deviation of the basic teachings of the religion."

⁵ The original text of article 4 of the Blasphemy Law states: "Pada Kitab Undang-undang Hukum Pidana diadakan pasal baru yang berbunyi sebagai berikut: Pasal 156a, Dipidana dengan pidana penjara selama-lamanya lima tahun barangsiapa dengan sengaja di muka umum mengeluarkan perasaan atau melakukan perbuatan: a. yang pada pokoknya bersifat

Sukarno also declared that the government's recognized religions were Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Confucianism. The decree does not ban other religions or beliefs, such as Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Shintoism, or Taoism, and their followers are in principle free to practice their religion as long as they do not violate other laws, though in reality they do face official and unofficial discrimination.

The use of the blasphemy law has mushroomed in recent decades. Under Sukarno it was never used, and under Suharto's thirty-two-year rule it was used rarely. Under Suharto's three successors—B. J. Habibie, Abdurrahman Wahid, and Megawati Sukarnoputri—it was never used. The deluge of blasphemy charges came with the election as President of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono in 2004. Yudhoyono strengthened the blasphemy law offices in the judicial system by creating branches in every province and regency.

During his decade in power, Yudhoyono's administration brought over a hundred cases to the courts, and in each case the accused were found guilty. In total, the law was used eight times in its first four decades, and 125 times under Yudhoyono. Several dozen other cases have occurred under President Joko Widodo, generally known as Jokowi, a lower rate than under Yudhoyono, but still disturbing.⁶ The most dramatic case, and one which has affected the whole country, was the trial and conviction of Jokowi's friend Ahok.

IV. Ahok's Trial and Conviction

The 2017 election for the governorship of Jakarta attracted coverage from media worldwide and produced the country's worst divisions since the years following the fall of Suharto in 1998. The campaign entangled the

permusuhan, penyalahgunaan atau penodaan terhadap suatu agama yang dianut di Indonesia; b. dengan maksud agar supaya orang tidak menganut agama apapun juga, yang bersendikan ke-Tuhanan Yang Maha Esa." See Amnesty International, "Prosecuting Beliefs: Indonesia's Blasphemy Laws." A rough translation is: "In the Criminal Code, a new article is issued which reads as follows: Article 156a, Convicted with imprisonment of up to five years for anyone who deliberately publicly issues or acts: a. which is basically hostile to, abuses or desecrates a religion that is embraced in Indonesia; b. with the intention that people do not adhere to any religion, which is based on the Godhead."

⁶ See Andreas Harsono, "The Human Cost of Indonesia's Blasphemy Law," *Human Rights Watch*, October 25, 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/10/25/human-cost-indonesias-blasphemy-law>. The law survived three constitutional challenges between 2009 and 2018, with the Constitutional Court stating that religious freedom was subject to limitations to preserve public order. In 2010, the court stated that these limits were to be defined by "religious scholars." See Daniel Peterson, "Blasphemy, Human Rights, and the Case of Ahok," *Asian Yearbook of Human Rights and Humanitarian Law*, August 13, 2018, 52–94, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004346888_003.

families of four former presidents, saw demonstrations by up to half a million people, widespread smears regarding religion and ethnicity, and multiple police investigations of senior political and religious leaders. It culminated in May 2017 with the imprisonment of the incumbent governor on charges of blasphemy.⁷

The trial and conviction of the governor, Ahok, was a watershed in the trend toward radicalization.⁸ Ahok is both ethnic Chinese in a society with strong anti-Chinese sentiments and Christian in a country that is 87 percent Muslim.⁹ However, he was an energetic and efficient governor of Indonesia's massive capital, achieved a 70 percent approval rating, and was widely expected to return to the governor's mansion in the 2017 election, perhaps to use this as a springboard to the vice presidency of the country, together with his friend and former running mate Jokowi. There are many photographs featuring Muslims supporting Ahok.

But, while campaigning in September 2016, he remarked that the Qur'anic verse *al-Maidah* 51, warning Muslims against taking Jews or Christians as friends, was being misused by some people to claim that Muslims should not vote for a Christian.¹⁰ Several days later, a video of his remarks that had been deceptively and mendaciously edited by Buni Yani, a communications lecturer, went viral. The video dropped some of Ahok's words in order to make him appear to be criticizing the Qur'an itself. While the original video of the speech is readily available, the doctored version has, of course, received vastly more viewers on social media.

The Indonesian Ulama Council then issued a fatwa accusing Ahok of blasphemy, and the Islamic Defenders Front—a radical group hitherto noted mainly for attacking religious minorities and churches, as well as liquor stores and nightclubs that did not pay them enough protection money

⁷ For background, see Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman and Prashant Waikar, "Fear and Loathing: Uncivil Islamism and Indonesia's Anti-Ahok Movement," *Indonesia* 106 (October 2018): 89–109, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/717836/pdf>; Alexander R. Arifianto, "Rising Islamism and the Struggle for Islamic Authority in Post-Reformasi Indonesia," *TRaNS: Trans-Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia* 8.1 (2020): 37–50, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/trans-trans-regional-and-national-studies-of-southeast-asia/article/rising-islamism-and-the-struggle-for-islamic-authority-in-postreformasi-indonesia/233273E8C-D730E147E7B517EC702948A>, <https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2019.10>.

⁸ For some background on Ahok, see Jan S. Aritonang, "Christians in Indonesia," in *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Indonesia*, ed. Robert Hefner (London: Routledge, 2018), 262–63.

⁹ 2019 figures from the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs, <https://data.kemenag.go.id/agamashboard/statistik/umat>.

¹⁰ "Ahok Apologizes to Muslims for Alleged Defamation," *Jakarta Post*, October 10, 2016, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2016/10/10/ahok-apologizes-to-muslims-for-alleged-defamation.html>.

—called for demonstrations demanding that he be tried and imprisoned or executed.

Other groups joining the campaign were the National Movement to Safeguard the Indonesian Ulama Council's Fatwa, the Aliansi Nasional Anti Syiah, and the Jamaat Ansharut Tauhid. On November 4 and December 2, 2016, there were massive, largely peaceful, demonstrations against blasphemy, one of which drew over half a million people. This was an unusual display of strength for the hitherto marginal Islamic Defenders Front and suggested that senior politicians, the military, and other elites were manipulating sincere religious grievances for political purposes. They also likely helped fund the massive demonstrations—the thousands of buses, lunch boxes, and neatly printed signs and T-shirts gave evidence of the kind of money not previously associated with the Islamic Defenders Front and its usual allies—and indeed, Indonesians often refer to protestors as *pasukan nasi bungkus* or the “boxed lunch crowd.” Meanwhile, some mosques in Jakarta hung banners calling on Muslims not to perform funeral prayers for deceased Muslims who had voted for Ahok. Some 266 such banners were removed in the city on March 14, 2017.¹¹

Meanwhile, for their part, the leadership of Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, Indonesia's and the world's largest Muslim organizations, counseled calm and advised their members to avoid political demonstrations and simply vote for those candidates they believed would contribute most to the public good. Despite these pleas, some senior members of both organizations joined in the accusations against Ahok. In the end, the moderate but massive and unwieldy Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah were outflanked by the radicals.

Ahok was charged and tried, though he continued to canvass votes, commuting daily between the campaign trail and the trial. On April 19, 2017, he lost, 58 to 42 percent. The prosecution then recommended the very light sentence of probation plus a one-year suspended jail term. However, on May 9, the five judges ignored this recommendation and sentenced Ahok to two years in prison. The following day, three of those judges were promoted by the Indonesian Supreme Court.¹² Ahok was released on January 24, 2019, because of the customary reduction of sentence for good behavior.

¹¹ “More Hate Banners Removed in Jakarta,” *Jakarta Post*, March 15, 2017, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2017/03/15/more-hate-banners-removed-in-jakarta.html>.

¹² On February 26, 2018, Ahok appealed his conviction to the Supreme Court. The presiding judge in the appeal was the same judge who had presided over his conviction. “Lawyer: Judges Made Mistake in Ahok's Case,” *Star*, February 28, 2018, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/regional/2018/02/28/lawyer-judges-made-mistake-in-ahoks-case/#DdjKE4rTJ831AdgE.99>.

The verdict split the country in ways not seen in decades. There had been widespread demonstrations in support of Ahok, but many of his defenders became afraid to speak out. It appeared to create tensions between the president and the military and the police, who tended to take different sides in the affair. Gatot Nurmantyo, then chief of the Indonesian military, publicly contradicted the national police chief, General Tito Karnavian, an ally of President Jokowi, about whether there was anything treasonous in the anti-Ahok demonstrations. In politically divided families, people refused to be in the same room with one another or attend each other's weddings.

The 2017 election had echoes of the 2014 presidential election, when Jokowi defeated Prabowo Subianto, son-in-law of the last dictator, Suharto, and a former special forces general accused of human rights abuses. Jokowi is the first Indonesian president from outside the military and political establishment. He and Ahok had campaigned together for governor and vice governor to run Jakarta in 2012, and both had won their respective offices. There had been rumors that Jokowi might be considering Ahok as his vice presidential running mate, and Prabowo and some of Suharto's children were believed to be planning another presidential run, perhaps hoping that current unrest would increase demand for expanded security and the firm political hand that a former general could provide.

V. Accusations against the Accusers

The proliferation of accusations and penalization of controversial speech made it all but inevitable that Ahok's accusers would themselves be accused of spreading falsehoods and insults.

On November 17, 2017, Buni Yani, the communications lecturer who had created and promulgated the tampered video of Ahok's talk, was himself sentenced to one and a half years in prison for spreading hate speech by manipulating the video, though strangely this did not affect Ahok's conviction.¹³

Then, Rizieq Shihab, leader of the Islamic Defenders Front and a leading instigator of the demonstrations, was investigated for blasphemy after reports that he made denigrating remarks about the Holy Trinity. He was then questioned concerning an allegation that he had insulted the official

¹³ Arya Dipa, "Buni Yani Gets 1.5 Years in Jail," *Jakarta Post*, November 14, 2017, <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2017/11/14/buni-yani-gets-1-5-years-in-jail.html>. He was released on January 2, 2020; see "Man Who Triggers Ahok's Blasphemy Conviction Released from Jail," *Jakarta Globe*, January 2, 2020, <https://jakartaglobe.id/news/man-who-triggers-ahoks-blasphemy-conviction-released-from-jail>.

national ideology of Pancasila. The police also interrogated him about whether he had slandered Sukarno, Indonesia's revered first president and independence hero. He was then again summoned to answer accusations that he had mocked the new banknotes, accusing them of featuring Communist symbols. Finally, on May 30, 2017, he was charged under the pornography law for allegedly sending sexually explicit messages via WhatsApp to Firza Husein, who was herself arrested for treason for her role in organizing the mass demonstrations.

Rizieq, a graduate of Saudi Arabia's King Saud University, fled to that country, where he has remained.¹⁴ His lawyer claimed he was a guest of the government there, which was covering all his expenses because he was a descendent of the Prophet. The Saudi government did not comment on the matter.¹⁵

This ongoing legal folderol suggests that the police were using multiple vague accusations to keep troublesome people in line. After all, few Indonesians face simultaneous charges for insulting the Trinity, Pancasila, a former President, or banknotes, not to mention engaging in pornography and consorting with a treason suspect.¹⁶

In June 2018, Presidential candidate Prabowo visited in Mecca to win his endorsement and promised to allow the Islamic Defenders Front leader to return to Indonesia without charges should he win. Rizieq returned the favor, telling his supporters that they must vote for Prabowo if they wanted homosexuality banned. In February 2019, the chairman of the Habib Rizieq Shihab Center, Abdul Ramadan, declared, "[Rizieq Shihab] said that if Prabowo won, he would go home."¹⁷ But Prabowo lost.

VI. Other Politically Charged Cases

Ahok's imprisonment has been by far the most famous instance of a blasphemy conviction, but it is not the only one, and several others have

¹⁴ "Eggi: Rizieq Pilih di Arab daripada Ditangkap," *Berita Satu*, September 14, 2017, <http://www.beritasatu.com/nasional/452644-eggi-rizieq-pilih-di-arab-daripadaditangkap.html#.Wbqln5MBcVc.twitter>.

¹⁵ "Fugitive FPI Leader Rizieq's Expenses Being Paid by Saudi Government since He's a Descendant of the Prophet: Lawyer," *Coconuts Jakarta*, October 12, 2017, <https://coconuts.co/jakarta/news/fugitive-fpi-leader-rizieqs-expenses-paid-saudi-govt-since-hes-descendent-prophet-lawyer/>.

¹⁶ The investigations into the accusations of insulting Pancasila and Sukarno were dropped in early 2018.

¹⁷ Paul Marshall, "Religious Tension on the Rise in Indonesia," *Religion Unplugged*, March 4, 2019, <https://religionunplugged.com/news/2019/3/4/religious-tension-on-the-rise-in-indonesia?rq=paul%20marshall>.

also had political motivations. For its part, the Islamic Defenders Front threatened to report Megawati Sukarnoputri to the police for insulting Islam by labeling the it as “anti-diversity” and having a “closed ideology,” something that they should normally have accepted as statements both accurate and praiseworthy. Megawati is one of Sukarno’s daughters and is one of the most powerful political figures in Indonesia, a former president and the head of the largest political party, the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle.

A larger politically motivated event occurred on October 22, 2018 in Garut, West Java. Here a member of the Barisan Ansor Serbaguna (Banser) youth movement burned a flag of Hizbut-Tahrir Indonesia, an organization now banned in Indonesia. A short video of the incident immediately went viral and was then quickly picked up by opposition-oriented television channels. Islamic hardliners speedily demanded that the flag burners be tried for blasphemy. Meanwhile, police arrested three people involved in the burning, although they were quickly released.

This seemingly small incident was the first use of religion, specifically accusations of blasphemy, against President Jokowi in the presidential race. It was also a challenge to the Humanitarian Islam movement and the moderation of Nahdlatul Ulama. Banser is the militia wing of Ansor, which is Nahdlatul Ulama’s young adult wing. The notion of an Islamic militia will certainly sound worrisome to Westerners.

But Banser is a good organization—I have talked with its leaders on many occasions and have their gift of a Banser baseball cap. Its members are required to be unarmed and to coordinate all their actions with the police. They also guard churches in times of unrest. If you are, say, an Indonesian Christian, you would usually be happy to know that Banser is close by.

The background to the flag burning is that seventy thousand Banser members were traveling to Yogyakarta on 1,400 buses for the launch of an interfaith movement dedicated to countering extremism worldwide. This was due to culminate in a celebration of national unity on October 26 in a rally of 100,000, including myself, at which Jokowi was going to speak. The members were told to expect provocations along the way and were instructed to hand over any inciting materials to the police. With the exception of the one incident in Garut, these instructions were carefully followed.

Details are murky, but the Garut incident has the smell of a setup. Yahya Cholil Staquf, head of Ansor and general secretary of Nahdlatul Ulama, said that as part of a focused campaign of “provocation and sabotage,”

Hizbut-Tahrir personnel disrupted the youth wing's celebrations, which then led to the flag burning.¹⁸

Hizbut-Tahrir was banned in Indonesia in 2017 because of its illegal call for an Islamic caliphate to replace the Indonesian republic. Waving its flag may even be illegal. But that flag also contains the *Shahada*, the Muslim confession of faith, so that burning it would also burn a sacred text. The ambiguities of a sacred text blazoned on the flag of a banned organization opens the door to demagoguery.

Many were outraged by the video and accused the Banser members of blasphemy. West Java governor Ridwan Kamil stated that he regretted the incident: "They were supposed to burn the symbol of an organization that had been banned by the government, but in my opinion, [the act] triggered a different interpretation." The Indonesian Ulama Council criticized Banser for the incident and said it should apologize but did not call for any punishments.¹⁹

On October 26, 2018, thousands of conservative Muslims took to the streets, and there were demonstrations throughout the country demanding that the flag burners be prosecuted. There were rallies at the office of the senior minister responsible for legal affairs. Many demonstrators carried Hizbut-Tahrir's black-and-white flag and chanted the creed written on it. One of the major groups behind these demonstrations was the National Movement to Safeguard the Indonesian Ulama Council's Fatwa. Its chairman, Yusuf Martak, demanded that the Ansor chairman, Yahya Cholil Staquf, be prosecuted for the flag-burning incident.²⁰ The National Movement to Safeguard the Indonesian Ulama Council's Fatwa was one of the major organizers of the campaign to accuse Ahok of blasphemy, which was discussed earlier.²¹

This incident was likely an attempted reprise of the political manipulation of Islam, and specifically of blasphemy charges, that were used in the 2017 election for governor of Jakarta, but now at the national level. Since

¹⁸ "Indonesia: Rally for Moderate Islam Halted over Fears of Violence," *Al Jazeera*, October 26, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/10/indonesia-rally-moderate-islam-halted-fears-violence-181026054738978.html>.

¹⁹ Kharishar Kahfi, "Suspected HTI Flag Burning Sparks Controversy among Muslims," *Jakarta Post*, October 23, 2018, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2018/10/23/suspected-hti-flag-burning-sparks-controversy-among-muslims.html>.

²⁰ Marguerite Afra Sapiie, "Hundreds Rally Decrying the Burning of 'HTI Flag' by NU's Youth Wing," *Jakarta Post*, October 26, 2018, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2018/10/26/hundreds-rally-decrying-the-burning-of-hti-flag-by-nus-youth-wing.html?src=mostviewed&pg=news/2018/10/23/suspected-hti-flag-burning-sparks-controversy-among-muslims.html>.

²¹ Paul Marshall, "When Blasphemy Runs Amok," *Providence*, May 1, 2017, <https://providencemag.com/2017/05/blasphemy-runs-amok-ahok-indonesia-jakarta/>.

Jokowi was due to address the mass rally, the accusations would taint him by association. They would also taint Nahdlatul Ulama, which took no official position on the election but whose members were often thought to be mostly Jokowi supporters, and Ma'aruf Amin, the former chairman of its supreme council was Jokowi's vice presidential running mate.

VII. Other Cases

Apart from blasphemy laws, Indonesia's stress on preserving harmony led to a 2017 election law whose Article 280c prohibits candidates from insulting others on the basis of race or religion. Even President Jokowi has been reported to the Elections Supervisory Agency under this section for his comments in the second presidential election debate criticizing his opponent Prabowo Subianto's vast land ownership.²²

Another case involved Grace Natalie, who is, like Ahok, an ethnic-Chinese Protestant and is the founder of the Indonesian Solidarity Party, which is aiming its appeal at millennials. At a November 11, 2018, rally, one attended by Jokowi, she told the crowd to oppose discriminatory local laws based on "the Bible or sharia" and said that "religion-based bylaws victimize women." Almost immediately, Eggi Sudjana, a Prabowo supporter, accused her of sowing division and perhaps committing blasphemy. She was questioned by police for seven hours about these accusations.²³

On November 25, 2018, Bakor Pakem, part of the Jakarta Prosecutor's Office (Kejati), a body within the Attorney General's Office charged with religious oversight and enforcing the 1965 blasphemy law, launched an Android app that allows mobile phone users to report any individuals suspected of "religious heresy." The app was made available on Google Play and includes a list of purported forbidden beliefs and banned mass organizations, a directory of fatwas issued by the semi-official Indonesian Ulama Council, and a form to report complaints or information about religious beliefs or sects.²⁴

²² "Jokowi Reported to Bawaslu for Remark on Prabowo's Land Ownership," *Jakarta Post*, February 19, 2019, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2019/02/19/jokowi-reported-to-bawaslu-for-remark-on-prabowos-land-ownership.html>.

²³ "Christian Politician in Indonesia Accused of Blasphemy," *UCA News*, November 2, 2018, <https://www.ucanews.com/news/christian-politician-in-indonesia-accused-of-blasphemy/83914>.

²⁴ Paul Marshall, "Indonesia, Google and the Surveillance State," *Religious Freedom Institute*, January 3, 2019, <https://www.religiousfreedominstitute.org/blog/indonesia-google-and-the-surveillance-state>.

There were repeated attempts to portray President Jokowi as anti-Muslim, something that he had attempted to guard against by recruiting Islamic leader Ma'aruf Amin as his vice-presidential running mate. On February 25, 2019, three Indonesian housewives were arrested because of an online video which claimed that, if re-elected, Jokowi would ban prayer and make gay marriage legal.²⁵ The video, now shared many thousands of times, showed two women in hijab headscarves telling an old man that Jokowi would end the call to prayer, force women to remove their hijab in public, and legalize gay marriage. Police spokesman Trunoyudho Wisnu Andiko told a press conference that the arrest was "a preventive measure because this [video] could potentially trigger anxiety and conflict."²⁶ Consequently, Jokowi sought to burnish his Islamic credentials further. Three days before the election, he even set off on a pilgrimage to Mecca.

Other tactics used against Ahok in the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election were again employed in the 2019 presidential election. In anonymous leaflets, Jokowi was accused of being a secret Christian and simultaneously of being linked to the disbanded Indonesian Communist Party. Islamists using the name Alumni 212, referring to the December 2, 2016 date of the biggest anti-Ahok demonstration, staged a reunion in Jakarta in which speakers declared that Jokowi had criminalized the Indonesian Ulama Council and was selling Indonesia to Chinese tycoons and foreigners. To counter these allegations, Jokowi distanced himself from Ahok, stressed the importance of Jerusalem to Muslims, came to the defense of persecuted Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar, and developed stronger ties with the Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, as well as the military.²⁷

Indonesia is not an Islamist state. In other situations, Ahok would be dead, perhaps at the hands of the government or, more likely, at the hands of radicals. This is not Pakistan, where after his prison sentence was completed, he would need to flee the country. After his re-election as president, Jokowi appointed Ahok the chief commissioner of the state-run oil company Pertamina, a very senior position, and on March 2, 2020, said that he was

²⁵ "Indonesian Housewives Arrested over Election Video: Police," *Agence France-Presse*, February 25, 2019, <https://www.nst.com.my/world/2019/02/463572/indonesian-housewives-arrested-over-election-video-police>.

²⁶ Marshall, "Religious Tension on the Rise."

²⁷ Erwida Maulia, "Indonesia's Islamists Create Re-Election Minefield for Widodo," *Nikkei Asian Review*, December 27, 2017, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Features/Asia-Insight/Indonesia-s-Islamists-create-re-election-minefield-for-Widodo?page=2>; Karlis Salna and Untung Sumarwan, "Jokowi Boosts Ties with Indonesia Military in Power Shift," *Bloomberg*, February 15, 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-02-14/jokowi-cements-ties-with-indonesia-military-in-political-shift>.

one of four candidates to head the special authority agency of the yet-to-be-built new capital city of Indonesia in East Kalimantan—roughly equivalent to the position he held before as governor of Jakarta.²⁸ A person with a blasphemy conviction is now back now in high government office, but only after a jail term, humiliation, the corruption of an election, and a bitterly divided country.

Through social media, the opposition to Ahok extended far beyond radicals. Because of the viral video, many ordinary Muslims sincerely believed that he had deliberately insulted them, and in turn this genuine religious sentiment was manipulated by senior politicians, the military, and other elites, who also likely helped fund the radicals. These machinations were also aimed at Jokowi, Indonesia's president and Ahok's former running-mate, who had been rumored to be considering Ahok as his vice presidential candidate for the 2019 national campaign.

But this use of blasphemy accusations as a potent political weapon could only happen because blasphemy charges had been used increasingly in the previous decades. These polarize not only politics but the country as a whole.

Conclusions

The freedom to debate, reject, or criticize religious ideas is an essential element of religious freedom. In contrast, prohibitions on blasphemy reflect the view that, in the realm of belief, government should serve as the arbiter and regulator of ideological orthodoxy. Islam is a complex and varied belief system shaping the views and practices of many of its 1.6 billion followers in culture, politics, economics, science, education, personal and family relations, and law and society, as well as what is often called religion. Hence limits on criticism are major means of social and political control—they coerce religious conformity and forcibly silence criticism of dominant religious ideas, especially when those ideas support, and are supported by, political power.

In the Muslim world, such restrictions also help radical interpretations of Islam to crush debate and discussion about the nature of faith and religion. Nor will it produce tolerance. After Pakistani governor Salman Taseer was murdered for his opposition to Pakistan's blasphemy laws, his daughter Sara correctly observed, "This is a message to every liberal to shut up or be

²⁸ Rizki Fachriansyah and Marchio Irfan Gorbiano, "Ahok among Four New Capital 'CEO' Candidates Handpicked by Jokowi," *Jakarta Post*, March 10, 2020, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/03/09/jokowi-handpicks-four-ceo-candidates-for-capital-relocation.html>.

shot.” Here “liberal” is not a reference to contemporary American usage of vaguely leftist views but to a commitment to personal freedom per se.

As the late Egyptian scholar Nasr Hamid Abu-Zayd, who had to flee Egypt for his views, has written, “coercively applied blasphemy laws narrow the bounds of acceptable discourse ... not only about religion, but about vast spheres of life, literature, science, and culture in general.”²⁹

And as the late Abdurrahman Wahid, former president of Indonesia, the world’s largest Muslim country, and head of Nahdlatul Ulama, the world’s largest Muslim organization, has written,

rather than legally stifle criticism and debate—which will only encourage Muslim fundamentalists in their efforts to impose a spiritually void, harsh and monolithic understanding of Islam upon all the world—Western authorities should instead firmly defend freedom of expression, not only in their own nations, but globally, as enshrined in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.³⁰

When politics and religion are intertwined, as they necessarily are in debates about blasphemy and insulting Islam, without religious debate and critique there can be no political debate and critique.

²⁹ Nasr Hamid Abu-Zayd, “Renewing Qur’anic Studies in the Contemporary World,” in Marshall and Shea, *Silenced*, 293.

³⁰ Abdurrahman Wahid, “Forward,” in Marshall and Shea, *Silenced*, xxi.