

Political tensions in Indonesia after jailing of Jakarta governor

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On Monday, Jakarta Governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama withdrew his appeal against a two-year jail sentence imposed by the North Jakarta District Court. Basuki was convicted on the concocted charge of “blasphemy” on May 9.

The frame-up was part of a politically motivated campaign organised by right-wing Islamist groups, undertaken in collaboration with political opponents of Indonesian President Joko Widodo. Elements within the country’s ruling elite are seeking to weaken Widodo’s coalition in the run up to the 2019 presidential and parliamentary elections.

The anti-Basuki campaign was based on chauvinism and racialism, attacking the governor’s Christian background and Chinese ethnicity. The campaign played a major role in bringing about Basuki’s defeat in the gubernatorial race on April 19—the blasphemy trial ran throughout the latter stages of the election campaign.

In a letter written from jail and read by his wife Veronica Tan at a press conference, Basuki said that he decided to withdraw his appeal “for the sake of our people and our nation.”

Basuki called for a halt to candlelight vigils and protests against his jailing, and Islamist counter-demonstrations, saying the “congestion and economic losses due to demonstrations disrupt traffic” in Jakarta.

There is an element of legal calculation in Basuki’s move. The prosecution’s appeal against the severity of the sentence—they had asked for probation—will still go ahead. The possibility of Basuki receiving an even harsher sentence via his own appeal will be removed.

There is no doubt, however, that deeper political considerations are involved. Basuki and the ruling elite as a whole are concerned about the possibility of unrest engendered by intense social divisions.

It was not just because of religious fervour that relatively small hardline Islamist groups, such as the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) and Muslim Peoples’ Forum, were able to mobilise hundreds of thousands of people at Jakarta anti-Basuki rallies on November 4 and December 2. That can be seen from the dynamics of the gubernatorial election itself.

These groups, as well as some leaders of the two largest Muslim organisations, Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, endorsed the candidacy of Agus Harmurti Yudhoyono, son of Widodo’s predecessor, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. For the election, the latter formed an electoral coalition of his Democratic Party with the three major Muslim parties—the United Development Party, National Mandate Party and National Awakening Party.

Yudhoyono senior had cultivated relationships with the conservative Muslim groups to shore up his shaky parliamentary support. During his presidential term, from 2004 to 2014, the reactionary 1965 blasphemy law was used 106 times, compared with eight times during the 1965 to 1998 Suharto military-backed dictatorship. Despite this clerical support, however, Agus was eliminated in the first round of voting on February 15 with a humiliating vote of less than 18 percent.

This left the run-off election in April to Basuki and the winner Anies Baswedan.

Anies is the front man for Prabowo Subianto, a Suharto-era general who was Widodo’s opponent in the 2014 presidential election. His Gerindra Party and its ally, the Islamist based Prosperous Justice Party, ran a three-pronged campaign for Anies and his deputy Sandiaga Uno, one of Indonesia’s richest men.

First, they tacitly supported the Islamists attacks on Basuki, while posing as champions of the poor.

Second, Anies solidarised with the 16,000 families forcibly evicted by Basuki's flood mitigation and development land reclamation program. Anies promised to end evictions, claiming he would create jobs and impose price controls.

Third, Prabowo who has associated himself with a more nationalist and protectionist economic program, presented himself as a maverick in an attempt to distance himself from the detested political establishment.

Widodo and his protégé Basuki are associated with the major infrastructure projects in Jakarta demanded by big business and foreign investors.

Widodo has pushed for pro-investor reforms to finance transport and energy sectors projects. In 2014 he met the demands of finance capital to slash fuel subsidies, raising prices and provoking widespread anger.

Widodo's coalition, led by former President Megawati Sukarnoputri's Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle, is seen by millions of people as part of the long line of administrations that promised economic growth while only benefitting the rich.

The Asian Development Bank estimates that to provide infrastructure and have any impact on deteriorating social conditions, \$US1.2 trillion is needed by 2030. Sixty percent of the \$400 billion required to finance Widodo's 2019 energy, clean water and transport plans must come from foreign investors.

Bloomberg has quoted analysts warning that the challenge from right-wing religious groups will make the president more reliant on his "rent-seeking" supporters, defer his pro-market "reforms" and scare off investors.

The stagnant world economy and the Trump administration's trade war threats make the economic and social situation even more precarious.

The *Jakarta Post* reported on a May 17 meeting at the State Palace between Widodo and the chief media editors that underscored the rising tensions.

Widodo criticised the ongoing demonstrations and use of sectarianism to undermine his administration and its agenda. Widodo told the assembled editors that if demonstrations took place outside "the legal corridor, then we should clobber [the perpetrators]."

Editors reminded Widodo that the word "clobber" (*gebuk*) was used by Suharto in 1989 when he began a

10-year crackdown on dissidents.

Widodo said he knew that but if he only twisted the ears of protesters he would be "considered lenient." He again echoed Suharto, whose military security apparatus is still intact, saying he would defend the constitution and the state ideology Pancasila against groups attacking it.



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