

5-1-2020

How Religious Beliefs Affect Roles in Political Decision-Making

Patricia A. Buczynski

Follow this and additional works at: <https://huskiecommons.lib.niu.edu/studentengagement-honorscapstones>

Recommended Citation

Buczynski, Patricia A., "How Religious Beliefs Affect Roles in Political Decision-Making" (2020). *Honors Capstones*. 624.

<https://huskiecommons.lib.niu.edu/studentengagement-honorscapstones/624>

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the Undergraduate Research & Artistry at Huskie Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Capstones by an authorized administrator of Huskie Commons. For more information, please contact jschumacher@niu.edu.

Northern Illinois University
(How Religious Beliefs Affect Roles in Political
Decision-Making)
**A Capstone Submitted to the
University Honors Program
In Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements of the Baccalaureate Degree
With Honors
Department of
Political Science
By
Patricia Buczynski
DeKalb, IL.
(May 2020)**

Abstract:

My senior capstone project will be focused on the analysis of how Muslim leaders' religious beliefs affect their role in political decision-making. More specifically, I will be incorporating a case study regarding the blasphemy trial with the former governor of Jakarta (Basuki Purnama, otherwise known as "Ahok"). Ahok identifies as a Christian of Chinese descent. He angered many hardline Islamist groups throughout Indonesia by being accused for publicly insulting the Islamic holy book. These accusations related directly to the Al-Maidah 51 verse of the Quran, violated the Indonesia 1965 law, as well as the Indonesian national motto (BBC, 2017). Many religious conservatives took this very seriously and threatened Purnama with political violence. This case study is relevant because it shows an example of blasphemy and how religion directly affects political decision-making within a Muslim-majority nation. For my capstone project, I will also be conducting further research on the Indonesia 1965 blasphemy law and the Al Maidah, 51 verse of the Quran. This information is relevant toward my overall analysis because these factors directly affect political leaders and citizens throughout Indonesia.

Blasphemy Law:

To begin with, it is important to understand the political background of Indonesia, as well as the conception of blasphemy. Blasphemy can be described as the political act of insulting or showing lack of respect toward a deity, or something that is considered sacred to a specific religion. Although the conception of blasphemy has evolved throughout various nations; it is strictly enforced in most Muslim-majority nations such as Indonesia. As stated in an online article, “The 1965 blasphemy law recognizes six official religions (Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Confucianism) and allows the government to ban groups and prosecute people that “distort” any of these religions. This law also mandates the President to dissolve any organizations that practice deviant teachings. If violated, the 1965 blasphemy law carries a maximum penalty of five years of imprisonment” (Buchanan, 2010). This quotation is relevant because it shows specific ways the 1965 blasphemy law has been enforced throughout Indonesia. It is important to recognize that individuals may serve time in prison for violating this law- which emphasizes the significance of religion throughout this nation.

Many Indonesian citizens have been charged for blasphemy throughout the years. For example, an Indonesian woman (Meliana) was imprisoned for blasphemy in North Sumatra. “Meliana’s journey to prison began in 2016 when she complained about the volume of call to prayer from a nearby mosque, privately asking the mosque caretaker’s daughter if the volume could be lowered. Rumors quickly spread that she was demanding all Muslims to stop their calls to prayer in her hometown. About a week later, Muslim mobs attacked her house, and because she is Buddhist, burned at least 14 Buddhist temples. Meliana shared a jail cell with about 15 women. There was not enough room to move around” (Harsono, 2018). To this day, it has been

over fifty years since the blasphemy law was created and it is still being strictly enforced. Many Indonesian citizens have expressed their concerns regarding the dangers of this law through protests and petitions. However, Indonesia's Constitutional Court has rejected petitions to revoke the blasphemy law.

Although the blasphemy law was intended to eliminate conflict throughout the nation, moderate Indonesian citizens fear it has created deep interreligious tensions and gave hardliners the right to attack other religions. In fact, moderate citizens would agree that this law puts religious minorities at risk and creates unnecessary conflict between individuals. As expressed in an article, Elaine Pearson (deputy Asia director at Human Rights Watch) stated that "Indonesia's laws should protect those who peacefully express religious views and punish those who threaten to use violence against others, not the other way around. If the government wants to prevent violence, it should send a message by punishing violent behaviors" (Human Rights Watch, 2010). This quotation supports my previous statement about how citizens have been expressing their concerns about potential dangers from this law for several years. In other words, they believe that if individuals are not physically harming anyone through their religious expressions or practices- they should not be punished in return by authority figures. However, religion seems to play a significant role in political decision-making in Indonesia. It is evident that hardline Islamists believe that their political leaders should share the same religious beliefs as them. If political leaders do not share the same religious beliefs, they must be extremely careful of their words and actions toward the public as seen in Ahok's case.

Case Study (Basuki Tjahja Purnama):

Understanding the conception of blasphemy in Indonesia is significant when analyzing the case study of Basuki Tjahja Purnama, otherwise known as Ahok. His political career began

in 2004 when he ran for the Regional Legislative Council in his home province of Bangka Belitung. In 2009, Ahok was elected to the House of Representatives. However, he decided to resign in 2012 to run as the deputy governor in Jakarta (Indonesia's capital) instead. Two years later, Ahok became the governor of Jakarta as Joko Widodo became the president of Indonesia. At first, Indonesian citizens supported Ahok's political ideologies. He was very involved with politics in Indonesia. Ahok had plans to tackle corruption, expand health care, clear Jakarta's canals, and more. His political plans were not deemed as threatening toward Indonesian citizens or the nation. Ahok also displayed a unique and passionate attitude towards politics which was inspiring and refreshing for many citizens. As mentioned in an article, "Ahok was among a wave of new, independent leaders, rising to national fame when he was elected as deputy governor alongside Jokowi in 2012, and taking over leadership of Indonesia's capital with the election of Jokowi to the presidency in 2014" (Coca, 2017). This quotation shows that Ahok was a well-known politician throughout this time. He was gaining popularity and making political history throughout Indonesia.

Moving forward, Ahok's political career began to down spiral during the 2017 governor elections. During a campaign trial, Ahok spoke out to residents and officials in Thousand Islands regarding voting rights. Ahok also referred to Al-Maidah, verse 51 of the Quran. According to research, Al-Maidah, verse 51 of the Quran has been used to deter Muslim voters from electing non-Muslim individuals as political leaders (Yosephine, 2016). A few days afterwards, the media got involved with Ahok's references toward Al-Maidah, verse 51 of the Quran. This is because Buni Yani (a communications lecturer) heavily edited the video of Ahok referring to the verse and uploaded select parts of it to Facebook. More specifically, Buni Yani purposely transcribed Ahok's words to create the perception that his references were negatively targeting the Quran

(central religious text of Islam); rather than his political opponents that misquoted verses from the Quran to support their political ideologies (Soeriaatmadja, 2014). This edited video included a provocative title which ended up offending many hardline Islamists and created public rage throughout Indonesia. Millions of individuals had access to this. As a result, Buni Yani's edited video went viral on the internet. Many hardline Islamists were furious with the fact that Ahok identified as a Christian of Chinese descendant and made public references to the central religious text of Islam. Shortly afterwards, there were many anti-Ahok rallies occurring throughout Indonesia. Many individuals were severely injured within the streets. Several media sources capture the anger and disappointment that hardline Islamists felt through Ahok's words.

To continue, thousands of protestors gathered in Jakarta and demanded that Ahok receives jail time for blasphemy because of his references to the Al-Maidah 51, verse of the Quran. These mass protests consisted of various Islamist groups that were defending the Quran. Groups of individuals clashed with police officers which also caused riots and violence throughout Jakarta. Several individuals were also setting vehicles to fire. As a result, fear rapidly spread throughout Indonesia and the president (Joko Widodo) promised to take legal action against Ahok. According to an online article, "Novel Chaidir Hasan, secretary-general of the hardline Islam Defenders Front (FPI), filed a police report with the National Police, charging Ahok with religious blasphemy" (Yosephine, 2016). Ahok repeatedly apologized to Indonesian citizens and insisted that he did not mean to criticize or insult the Islamic faith in any form. However, hardline Islamists continued to demand that Ahok serves time in prison despite his apologies. During Ahok's trials, several judges found him guilty. One of the judges claimed that Ahok caused anxiety, violence, and offended many Muslims throughout the nation- which was unacceptable. Another judge stated that as a political leader in Indonesia, he should have been

more careful with his words (Lamb, 2017). On May 9, 2017 Ahok was sentenced to two years of prison after being found guilty for blasphemy and causing violence within the nation.

Significance:

This case study is significant because Ahok became the first politician in Indonesia to be charged with blasphemy. As emphasized previously, Ahok's case study shows that religion plays a significant role in political decision-making throughout Muslim-majority nations, such as Indonesia. Although Ahok had positive intentions for Indonesia and the well-being of its citizens, religious conservatives found it very difficult to accept that his religious views were not aligned with Muslim beliefs. Ahok was not released from jail until the early months of 2019. He was in jail for a total of two years. According to research, Ahok's lawyer confirmed that he had the option to be released from prison earlier on parole. However, Ahok's sister publicly announced his intentions through her social media (Instagram) page. "Ahok would rather leave prison after serving his entire sentence. He has made the personal decision to carry out the remainder of his term" (The Jakarta Post, 2017). The social media post created by Ahok's sister suggests that he wanted to avoid further political conflict and violence throughout Indonesia.

Although Ahok was released from jail after two years- it is important to recognize that he lost all chances of continuing his political career within Indonesia. This is because it is against the law to have a politician run as a political figure after serving jail time. Since Ahok was the first politician to be charged with blasphemy, tensions will remain high throughout Indonesia for a while. On the other hand, moderate Indonesian citizens were also upset and disappointed with the way that Joko Widodo (Indonesia's current president) handled this situation. This is because Joko Widodo considers himself a moderate Muslim. Several individuals claim that Widodo should have been focusing on the well-being of citizens and welfare instead of political

blasphemy. As a result, the next election will be most likely be focused on the role of religion and politics within Indonesia (Hutton, 2017). Individuals throughout the globe are beginning to wonder whether Indonesia is becoming a more radical nation.

In comparison, individuals in other Muslim-majority nations claim that they would like to have democracy, freedom, and Islam intertwined with political decision-making. As mentioned in an article, “There is a strong desire for Islam to play a major role in the public life of various nations, and most individuals want Islam to have at least some influence on their country’s laws. For example, majorities in Pakistan and Jordan believe laws should strictly follow teachings of the Quran” (Pew Research Center, 2012). This quotation shows that individuals living in Muslim-majority nations feel comfortable with political ideologies that intertwine with their religious beliefs. Many hardline Islamists groups would like to turn Indonesia into a true Muslim nation. In this case, individuals must choose whether they desire democracy and secularism, or the role of religion intertwined with politics. This is because nations that are considered a true democracy do not have direct, religious influence over politics or law-making. In countries such as the United States and France, there is a separation of the church and state. These countries do not experience direct influence over political decision-making.

Conclusion:

Overall, Ahok’s case study is significant because it shows how religion directly affects political decision-making in a Muslim-majority nation. The 1965 blasphemy law continues to affect Indonesian citizens daily. Regardless of Ahok’s political ideologies and positive intentions for Indonesia, it took one (purposely negative) edited video to go viral on the internet and ruin his political career forever. As emphasized throughout my research, Ahok’s actions caused violence and hatred between groups of individuals throughout Indonesia. Studies have shown

that Muslim individuals want political democracy and freedom, but they would also like to have Islam to play a significant role within politics. Ahok's case study makes many individuals curious for the future in terms of politics and religion in Muslim-majority nations, such as Indonesia. Regardless of the direction for the future, it is clear that religion will continue to have a significant effect on politics in Muslim-majority nations.

Works Cited

- Ahok to Finish His Term in Prison, Despite Possible August Parole.* The Jakarta Post, 12 July 2018, www.thejakartapost.com/news/2018/07/12/ahok-to-finish-his-term-in-prison-despite-possible-august-parole.html.
- Buchanan, Kelly. *Indonesia: Constitutional Court Upholds Blasphemy Law.* Global Legal Monitor, 22 Apr. 2010, www.loc.gov/law/foreign-news/article/indonesia-constitutional-court-upholds-blasphemy-law/.
- Coca, Nithin. *The Fall of Ahok and Indonesia's Future.* The Diplomat, 21 Apr. 2017, thediplomat.com/2017/04/the-fall-of-ahok-and-indonesias-future/.
- Harsono, Andreas. *The Human Cost of Indonesia's Blasphemy Law.* Human Rights Watch, 25 Oct. 2018, www.hrw.org/news/2018/10/25/human-cost-indonesias-blasphemy-law.
- Hutton, Jeffrey. "Why Widodo Had to Throw Ahok under a Bus." South China Morning Post, 15 July 2017, www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/2102487/why-indonesias-widodo-had-throw-ahok-under-bus.
- "Indonesia: Court Ruling a Setback for Religious Freedom." Human Rights Watch, 19 Apr. 2010, www.hrw.org/news/2010/04/19/indonesia-court-ruling-setback-religious-freedom.
- "Jakarta Governor Ahok Found Guilty of Blasphemy.", BBC News, 9 May 2017, www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-39853280.
- Lamb, Kate. "Jakarta Governor Ahok Sentenced to Two Years in Prison for Blasphemy." *Guardian News and Media*, The Guardian, 9 May 2017, www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/09/jakarta-governor-ahok-found-guilty-of-blasphemy-jailed-for-two-years.
- "Most Muslims Want Democracy, Personal Freedoms, and Islam in Political Life." *Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project*, Pew Research Center, 30 Dec. 2019,

www.pewresearch.org/global/2012/07/10/most-muslims-want-democracy-personal-freedoms-and-islam-in-political-life/.

Soeriaatmadja, Wahyudi. *Man, Who Uploaded Controversial Video of Ex-Jakarta Governor Ahok Sentenced to Jail*. The Straits Times, 14 Nov. 2017, www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/man-who-uploaded-controversial-ahok-video-sentenced-to-jail.

Yosephine, Liza. *Violence Stems from Inter-Ethnic Tensions*. The Jakarta Post, 7 Nov. 2016, www.thejakartapost.com/news/2016/11/07/violence-stems-from-inter-ethnic-tensions.html.