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Author(s)	Nursheila Muez
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## **Protesting Ahok: Flaking Indonesian Islam's Pluralistic Tradition**

*By Nursheila Muez*

### **Synopsis**

*The protests in the lead-up to Jakarta's gubernatorial elections, demanding the ouster of minority candidate Ahok for blasphemy, demonstrated how religion, in its decontextualised form, was employed for politics. The misuse of sacred texts for political gains can undermine the pluralistic tradition of Indonesian Islam.*

### **Commentary**

JAKARTA RECENTLY witnessed its biggest rallies in years when on 4 November 2016, some 100,000 people took to the streets. Most called for the arrest, and some demanded the execution, of Jakarta governor Basuki Tjahaya Purnama, popularly known as Ahok, for alleged blasphemy. Thousands more were involved in a second rally on 2 December. These rallies were organised by the National Fatwa Guardians of the Indonesian Ulama Council (GNPF-MUI) and led by the conservative Muslim group Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), under the banner "Bela Islam" (Defend Islam). They were followed by the court trial of Ahok for blasphemy the week after.

While grievances with Ahok should not be dismissed as purely religiously driven – claims of corruption and policies biased towards the middle class ethnic Chinese minority are allegedly aplenty – mass support and mobilisation were possible precisely because of the use of religious rhetoric. This has led many media reports to simply frame the protests as a sign of a radical and hardline strain of Islam taking hold in Jakarta. What the hardliners have also demonstrated was how a decontextualised reading of a sacred text – in this case the Quran – can lead to ends that stir up public peace and social cohesion.

### **Reading Q 5:51 in Context**

Ahok, a Chinese Christian, had suggested that verse 51 of Chapter 5 of the Quran (Q 5:51) had been misused by his political opponents to sway voters and justify their assertion that Muslims could not have him as their political leader. The MUI responded by saying that in so claiming, Ahok had defamed the Quran and blasphemed Islam.

Taken literally, verse Q 5:51 discourages Muslims from taking as friends, confidants and leaders, their Abrahamic brethren, the Christians and Jews. However, this verse should not be read out of context without consideration for its historical circumstances. It was revealed at a time of hostilities between a nascent Muslim community and specific tribes, including particular Christian tribes – not Jews and Christians as such – in seventh century Arabia.

Indeed, some scholars have acknowledged the Qur'an holds Christians in high regard and singles them out as being "closest in affection" to Muslims (Q 5:82). It also makes reference to the People of the Book, which could be read to include Christians, as belonging to an "upright community" (Q 3:113).

### **Contextualisation in Islamic Tradition**

Reading the Quran in context refers to the understanding of the meaning and objective of revelation in relation to a specific context, and then being able to apply its teachings anew taking into account contemporary realities. Indeed, the very act of contextualising the religion has been integral to its historical acceptance by distinct peoples living in diverse places at different times.

Islam's ability to incorporate external elements from other non-Muslim cultures has allowed it to flourish in places like China, once thought to be a remote and an unlikely destination for Muslims. For instance, the Chinese *ulama'* of the 17th-century such as Wang Dai-yu (d. 1660) and Liu Zhi (d. 1739) wrote about and taught Islam, using Confucian terminology and categories of thought. In this manner, the concepts of God, prophethood, heaven and hell became intelligible for the Chinese community. As a result, Chinese Muslims are able to live a form of Islam that is familiar, while still in accordance with the dictates of the religion.

Centuries earlier, Muslim philosophers such as al-Kindi (d. 873), al-Farabi (d. 950) and Ibn Rushd (d. 1198) synthesised the writings of Plato and Aristotle with Islamic philosophy. Beyond translating the texts, these philosophers made significant contributions to the corpus of knowledge in the world. For example, al-Kindi repurposed the Greek notion of the first principle (*arche*) to be the Creator, thereby bringing out the relevance of Greek philosophy not only to Islam but to other monotheistic religions like Christianity in the West.

### **Contextualisation Within Ethical Boundaries**

The examples from the Quran and from within the Islamic tradition are theological and historical justifications to contextualisation within Islam. Nevertheless, contextualisation has been met with scepticism by some who argued that it can lead to moral relativism or a dilution of the "true Islam". How then can we ensure that

Islam does not become too foreign or unrecognisable? What are the elements of the religion that can be contextualised?

The Islamic scholarly tradition has established a hierarchy of values in Islam that could help us in distinguishing the permanent elements of the religion (*tsawabit*) from those that are changing (*mutaghayyirat*), in order to derive meaning from the Quran and address the challenges of contextualisation. They set the boundaries for contextualisation and ensure that efforts at doing so do not fall into moral relativism. At the same time, recognising the existence of a hierarchy of values would also prevent interpretations that conflict with the very substance or universal values of the religion.

An example of an obligatory value in Islam is its theological worldview of One God that creates and sustains the universe. This explains why, despite being heavily influenced by Greek learning in philosophy and the sciences, classical Muslim scholars engaged with Greek philosophy but did not freely import Greek mythology into its literary corpus because of concerns that doing so undermined its monotheistic worldview.

### **Islam in Contemporary Context**

This episode has put at stake a critical matter for Indonesian Islam. It is not the transitory issue of the electioneering for the governor of Jakarta or Ahok's ouster as such that is of fundamental concern here. What is at stake crucially is how a religious rationalisation through a decontextualised reading of the Qur'an that is unfriendly towards Christians and other non-Muslims could become encrusted into the tradition of Islam in Indonesia.

Indonesia has the world's largest Muslim community, and is a pluralistic society. On the very subject of Islam's hospitality to other religions, it has much to offer to the Muslim world of today, which is riven by religiously-motivated violence. It behooves Muslim scholars and leaders to challenge the misuse of religious scriptures for errant political ends through their contextualised reading.

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*Nurshella Muez is a Research Analyst with the Studies in Inter-Religious Relations in Plural Societies Programme (SRP), at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. A version of this appeared earlier in The Straits Times.*

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