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Christian Governor in Indonesia Found Guilty of Blasphemy Against Islam

By JOE COCHRANE | MAY 9, 2017



The Christian governor of Jakarta, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, arriving at court on Monday. Mr. Basuki was only the city's second non-Muslim governor. Credit...Pool photo by Bay Ismoyo

JAKARTA, Indonesia — An Indonesian court found the Christian governor of the country's capital, Jakarta, guilty of blasphemy against Islam on Tuesday, sentencing him to two years in prison in a case widely seen as a test of religious tolerance and free speech.

The governor, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, was [defeated last month](#) by Anies Baswedan, a former minister of education and culture, in an election in which the blasphemy case, and religion, was a major issue.

Mr. Basuki began his sentence on Tuesday. Deputy Governor Djarot Saiful Hidayat is to serve as acting governor until October, when Mr. Anies takes office.

Blasphemy is a crime in Indonesia, a secular democracy with the world's largest Muslim population. The sentence was harsher than what prosecutors had asked for; they had recommended two years' probation on a lesser charge, which would have spared Mr. Basuki prison time.

Mr. Basuki told reporters that he would appeal, as supporters outside the North Jakarta District Court looked on in shock.

Hard-line Islamic groups opposing Mr. Basuki were seen celebrating.

Mr. Basuki's 16-point defeat last month was seen as a sign of [the increasing power of Islamic conservatives](#), who have pressed for the adoption of Islamic law, or Shariah, throughout Indonesia.

Shortly after the verdict, the governor was taken to Cipinang Penitentiary in Jakarta, which houses criminals including drug dealers and rapists. Under Indonesia's procedural code, the governor was not eligible to remain free during his appeal because he had faced a possible sentence of five years or more, according to legal experts.

Mr. Basuki, known as Ahok, became governor of Jakarta, the country's political, social and economic center, in 2014 when his predecessor and chief political ally, [Joko Widodo, became president](#). Mr. Basuki, who is ethnic Chinese, was only the second non-Muslim governor in the city and had hoped to become its first directly elected non-Muslim leader.

He had been leading in the polls last year, but in September his campaign faltered when he tried to address attacks from Muslim hard-liners who argued that the Quran prohibited Muslims from voting for a non-Muslim. Mr. Basuki said those who made that argument were misleading Muslims, a statement that was interpreted by some as insulting the Quran.

Conservative Muslim groups organized several rallies against him, demanding that he be jailed for blasphemy. Mr. Basuki and his supporters asserted that the protests were orchestrated by his political rivals to sabotage his chances of re-election.

In what appeared to be a show of strength by the national government a day before the verdict, the security minister, Wiranto — who, like many Indonesians, goes by only one name — announced that legal action would be taken to disband the Indonesian chapter of Hizb ut-Tahrir, an ultraconservative Islamic political movement that had participated in some of the protests against Mr. Basuki.



Supporters of Mr. Basuki outside the court in Jakarta on Tuesday. Shortly after the verdict, the governor was taken to a penitentiary to begin serving his two-year sentence. Credit...Mast Irham/European Pressphoto Agency

Hizb ut-Tahrir rejects democratic governance and says it aims to create a Pan-Islamic state among predominantly Muslim countries, by force if necessary. The group has been tolerated in Indonesia despite openly rejecting the secular, democratically elected government and the pluralist, multireligious national ideology, known as Pancasila.

Indonesia has more than 190 million Muslims and smaller numbers of Christians, Hindus and Buddhists among its population of 250 million.

The five-judge panel decided unanimously that Mr. Basuki “proved legally and convincingly guilty of committing the criminal act of blasphemy,” the head judge, Dwiwarso Budi Santiarto, said in reading the ruling.

The blasphemy law dates from 1965, and only a handful of people were prosecuted under its terms during the next 40 years, according to Andreas Harsono, an Indonesia researcher for Human Rights Watch.

However, he said, the number of people convicted of blasphemy skyrocketed to 106 from 2004 to 2014, during the presidency of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, Mr. Joko’s

predecessor. Mr. Yudhoyono's son was eliminated in the first round of the governor election in February.

Mr. Yudhoyono twice held news conferences to deny that he had orchestrated the protests against Mr. Basuki's candidacy.

"It's a sad day, and it's frightening," Mr. Andreas said. "If the governor of Indonesia's largest and most complex city, and who is an ally of the Indonesian president, can be brought down and humiliated this way, what will happen to normal Indonesian citizens?"

Gregory Fealy, an associate professor at Australian National University who specializes in Indonesian politics, said that given Mr. Basuki's heavy loss in last month's election and continued demands by hard-line Islamic groups that he be jailed — including at a street rally on Friday — he had little chance of acquittal.

"Indonesian judges tend to err on the side of public opinion," he said. "That often has a big impact on how they make their decision."

Some analysts said that the panel of judges had taken reports that Mr. Basuki had slandered Islam as a personal insult — rather than looking at the legal merits of the case — and noted that during the reading of the verdict one judge had emotionally recited the Quran verse that the governor was convicted of insulting.

Douglas Ramage, managing director for Indonesia of Bower Group Asia, an investment advisory firm, said that foreign companies might delay investments in the country until after the presidential election in 2019, when Mr. Joko will face challenges from opposition parties that were accused of helping to topple Mr. Basuki.

"It introduces what no investor wants to see in any country, and that's volatility and increased political uncertainty," Mr. Ramage said. "This verdict was not expected; the prosecution had asked for probation."

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/09/world/asia/indonesia-governor-ahok-basuki-tjahaja-purnama-blasphemy-islam.html>