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Tolerance on trial

Indonesia has managed to resist religious extremism – until now

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Indonesia is entering a time of intense political campaigning. In 2018, half its 34 provinces will elect governors and parliaments for the next five years, and there are several city and district elections. And in 2019 Indonesia will choose a new parliament and president for the next 5 years.

With 87 percent of its 260 million inhabitants Muslim, Indonesia is the most important Muslim-majority democracy in the world.

The country has long been regarded a model of Islamic tolerance. Indeed, notwithstanding the occasional flair up, Indonesians of different religions live peacefully side-by-side. Freedom of religion is enshrined in the Indonesian constitution and non-Muslims are recognised as full citizens of Indonesia.

Running Ahok

Over the last eighteen months, however, Indonesia has experienced a wave of Islamist populism.

In 2014, the then governor of Jakarta Joko 'Jokowi' Widodo became president. Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, known as Ahok, replaced him as governor.

A Protestant of Chinese extraction, Ahok is a double minority. When in September 2016 he made a clumsy reference to the Koran, Muslim hardliners staged protests to press the authorities to arrest him.

In April last year Ahok lost his bid for re-election. Shortly afterwards a court sentenced him to two years in prison for blasphemy. Yet the hardliners are once again mobilising under the banner 'Alumni 212' –

named after a previous anti-Ahok demonstration. It is unclear whether Indonesia's democracy will be able to withstand the Islamists' increasing influence.

History provides some reasons for optimism. There has always existed an extremist wing in Indonesian Islam. Between 1950 and 1962 *Darul Islam* rebels fought a guerrilla war against the Indonesian Central Government in Western Java, Sulawesi and Aceh. Since the 1970s, fundamentalist ideologies such as Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood or Palestine's *Hizbuth* have infiltrated Indonesia's big secular universities. Hundreds of young Indonesians fought as Mujahidin in Afghanistan.

Muslim-majority, but not Islamic

But hardliners and fundamentalist ideologues were always a minority. Most Indonesian Muslims regard themselves as moderate and anti-extremist. They can roughly be divided into two camps.

The first is pious, but rejects Indonesia's cultural or religious politicisation. The moderate PDIP party identifies with this group, and is also the party of choice for Indonesia's 24 million Christians, its Balinese Hindus and adherents of other religions.

The second group, often called the Islamic mainstream, is represented by two civil society groups that predate independence (declared in 1945). *Nadlatul Ulama* (NU) operates mainly in the countryside. It runs thousands of Quranic boarding schools and claims more than 40 million members. *Muhammadiyah*m with some 30 million members is seen as reformist. It runs schools, hospitals and more than a hundred universities.

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Both groups reject the notion Indonesia is an 'Islamic' state, and instead subscribe to Pancasila, the pluralist philosophy that founded the modern-day Indonesia. And both kept out of 2016's anti-Ahok demonstrations. The groups have been traditionally regarded as the representative voice of Indonesian Islam.

The 212 movement wants to challenge this, but they will face an uphill struggle. NU and Muhammadiyah see not Christians, but extremist Islamic movements, as the adversary. NU even went so far as to issue a

fatwa declaring Saudi Arabian backed Wahhabism as heretical.

The danger of religious radicalisation has not been lost on ordinary Indonesians. In December, Muslims went out of their way to wish merry Christmas to their Christian neighbours. And Muslim political leaders also attended parliamentary Christmas celebrations for the first time.

In the long run though, Indonesia's future will likely depend less on ideological developments, more on whether the population feels social justice is being served. If lower- and middle-class Indonesians feel the existing democratic-pluralistic system gives will provide a future for their children, they will not turn to extremism. For that, President Joko Widodo will need to fulfil his promise of improving living conditions for the poorest 50 per cent.



Franz Magnis-Suseno
Jakarta

Pater Franz Magnis-Suseno is a philosopher, anthropologist and Jesuit priest based in Indonesia. He campaigns for human rights and inter-religious dialogue.