

Racial and religious prejudice faced by the outgoing Chinese-Indonesian governor of Jakarta, now imprisoned for blasphemy, is not a new phenomenon in Indonesia. Ethnic Chinese and Christians in Indonesia have endured systematic and long-standing discrimination throughout the nation's history.

Earlier this month, the former governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, better known as Ahok, was sentenced to two years in prison for blasphemy.

This conviction follows his defeat in last month's Jakarta gubernatorial election to a Muslim candidate, former Indonesian government minister Anies Baswedan. Ahok's opponents ran a campaign against him based on ethnic and religious grounds.

The campaign against Ahok

Ahok acquired the position of Jakarta governor by default. He was deputy governor to Joko Widodo, who vacated the governorship after winning the 2014 Indonesian presidential election.

At an election campaign event last year, Ahok told his audience that religious leaders who were using an interpretation of a verse of the Quran against him were [fooling Indonesians](#). These religious leaders interpreted Verse 51 of Al-Maidah as prohibiting non-Muslims ruling over Muslims.

Large protests demanding Ahok be jailed for blasphemy ensued. These were also laden with anti-Chinese slogans. For example, at a November 16 rally, some protesters [chanted](#) "crush the Chinese".

The Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), an Islamic vigilante group, [organised](#) some of these rallies. At one protest, FPI leader Rizieq Shihab [asked](#) protesters "would you accept an infidel as governor [of Jakarta]?" – a clear reference to Ahok.

Rizieq's comment is unsurprising. The FPI consistently [opposed](#) Ahok serving as Jakarta's acting governor due to his non-Muslim background.

During the election campaign, anti-Christian posters and banners could be seen in the streets of Jakarta. One such poster [read](#) "it is forbidden to pick an infidel leader". Another banner [stated](#) that "Muslims who vote for an infidel [Ahok] ... do not deserve a funeral prayer".

Discrimination against Chinese Indonesians

Chinese-Indonesians, representing approximately 2% of Indonesia's population of 250 million, experienced widespread discrimination during the Soeharto era (1966-98).

Soeharto's regime banned Chinese language, newspapers, schools and cultural expressions. Chinese names were also prohibited. As a result, Chinese Indonesians were pressured to take Indonesian names.

[In May 1998](#), during the devastating Asian Financial Crisis, Indonesians directed their anger against ethnic Chinese who they inaccurately perceived to be universally affluent. Rioters damaged Chinese Indonesians' businesses in Jakarta's Chinatown, Glodok, and in some cases burned them. During this period, many ethnic Chinese women were [raped](#) and some ethnic Chinese were killed.

Under Abdurrahman Wahid's administration (1999-2001), Indonesia [ended](#) the ban on Chinese language, newspapers, schools and displays of Chinese culture. But discrimination against Chinese-Indonesians remains.

A 1967 decree prohibiting Chinese Indonesians from serving in the Indonesian armed forces remains in place. And, unlike non-Chinese Indonesians, Chinese-Indonesians possess an [SBK RI](#), a document that proves their Indonesian citizenship. This document is still sometimes required for Chinese-Indonesians to obtain passports, enrol in schools and acquire business licences.

Discrimination against Christians in Indonesia

Ahok is part of two minority groups in Indonesia. Christian Indonesians comprise roughly 10% of Indonesia's population. They, too, have been discriminated against throughout Indonesia's history.

Since 2006, 500 Christian churches have been [shut down](#) in Indonesia. Some Islamists have been using a 2006 government regulation, which requires religious leaders to obtain community support prior to building places of worship, to demand church closures.

Discrimination against Christians also occurred during the Soeharto era. In 1967, Muslim militants [damaged](#) Christians' properties in Jakarta, South Sulawesi and Aceh on the grounds of fighting Indonesia's purported Christianisation.

Where to from here?

Following his election victory, Anies Baswedan publicly [pledged](#) as the incoming Jakarta governor to "safeguard [Jakarta's] diversity and unity".

However, to ensure Indonesia remains an inclusive democracy, Anies needs to go further than this. He should directly denounce the ethnic and religious campaign mounted against Ahok, notably by the FPI.

Furthermore, Jokowi's administration needs to dismantle Soeharto-era discriminatory regulations and policies against ethnic Chinese.

If Anies fails to denounce the ethnic and religious campaign against Ahok and Jokowi does not attempt to remove anti-Chinese laws and regulations, Indonesia's history of discrimination against Chinese and Christian Indonesians will continue to repeat itself.

Olivia Tasevski does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond the academic appointment above.

Anti-Chinese and anti-Christian sentiment is not new in Indonesia

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