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Navigating Indonesia's Political and Ethnic Unrest: The Ahok Blasphemy Incident Revisited

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Abstract

This paper aims to revisit the infamous blasphemy case involving Jakarta's governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, known as Ahok, in 2016, which sparked significant political and social unrest in Indonesia. As the first ethnic Chinese and non-Muslim governor of a predominantly Muslim city, Ahok was accused of blasphemy for quoting a verse from the Qur'an during his 2017 election campaign. His remarks, intended to criticize opponents using religious justification against his leadership, were perceived as an insult by Islamist conservatives, leading to massive protests on November 4th and December 2nd, 2016, known as the 411 and 212 rallies. These protests initially focused on blasphemy and escalated into broader anti-Chinese sentiments, highlighting Indonesia's recurring ethnic tensions during political transitions. While Indonesia's *flawed* democracy has allowed 'rallies' and 'social movements' to burgeon in recent decades, this paper explores the political and ethnic dynamics surrounding ethnic and religious rallies from constructionist and circumstantialism lenses. By learning from Ahok's case, this paper aims to provide the historical context of anti-Chinese sentiments and insights into the position of Chinese Indonesians within Indonesia's political landscape and the underlying causes of such ethnic conflicts, and moving forward, creating more inclusive opportunities for ethnic minorities in Indonesia.

Keywords:

Anti-Chinese sentiments; constructionist; circumstantialism; ethnicity; rallies

Introduction

The infamous blasphemy case involving Jakarta's incumbent governor, Basuki Thahaja Purnama, more well-known by his nickname Ahok, back in 2016 created political and social unrest in Indonesian society. Ahok was the first ethnic Chinese and a Christian who led

Jakarta's governor's office, the city in which most of the population was Muslim. In this case, Ahok was accused of blasphemy by quoting Al Maidah verse 51 from the Qur'an during his public speech during the 2017 Jakarta election campaign period in September 2016. In his speech, Ahok criticized his political opponent, who used the verse of the Qur'an to justify their stand that a non-Muslim leader should not lead Muslims. However, the Islamist conservatives considered his speech as an insult to the verse itself.

This 'perceived' misdemeanor of Ahok was then creating a national outcry. It led to a series of mass protests on November 4th and December 2nd of 2016, later known as the 411 and 212 rallies organized by the hard-line Islamist group in Jakarta. More than 500.000 people participated in the 212 rallies (Jegho, 2016), and they demanded the government to prosecute and arrest Ahok. While the initial cause of the rally was blasphemy, the problem then escalated to a more racist, anti-Chinese sentiment directed at Ahok's identity as Ethnic Chinese (Setijadi, 2017).

Indonesia has been experiencing many ethnic conflicts, given the pluralist nature of the country. The sentiments toward ethnic Chinese people in Indonesia have always been apparent in Indonesian society. Most of the time, ethnic violence and discrimination occurred coinciding with political shifts and social changes. Indonesia is a pluralistic country by nature, and its diversity encompasses religious beliefs, racial features, languages and dialects, and many other socio-cultural diversities.

The existing literature on Ahok's blasphemy case employs various perspectives. In media studies, for instance, major national newspapers, such as *Kompas* and *Republika*, used contrasting media framing on Ahok's blasphemy cases, with *Kompas* taking a more liberal perspective and *Republika* reflecting more of an Islamic perspective (Saputra, 2020). Different research studies have also examined this case through religious dynamics, which shows the trend of discrimination and intolerance against minority religious groups in Indonesia (Mazrieva, 2019; Zuidweg, 2018). This research, then, tries to add elements of ethnicity and multiculturalism to enrich the discussion.

This paper examines the anti-Chinese sentiments, rallies, and political motives from the perspective of constructionist and circumstantialism approaches. The discussion presents the historical background of Chinese Indonesians, the anti-Chinese sentiments throughout the years, and the involvement of Chinese Indonesians in local political discourse. Then, the role of rallies in mobilizing the masses is also provided. This research aims to understand Chinese

Indonesians' position within Indonesian political narratives and the nature of anti-Chinese sentiments in Indonesia.

As has always been the case of any ethnic conflict in a developing country, the inter-ethnic tension was closely tied to society's economy and political conditions (Ayoob in Saputra, 2020). Likewise, in Indonesia, discrimination and marginalization towards ethnic Chinese stemmed from prolonged negative sentiments that caused the emergence of many ethnic conflicts. Many scholars saw this phenomenon as a battle between liberal and Islamic fundamentalist values (Varagur in Lim, 2017) and a challenge to the pluralism and tolerance values that Indonesians have always declared for years. The escalation of Ahok's case also impacted not only ethnic marginalization but also a setback for political opportunities. Framed within the context of the 2017 Jakarta Governor's election, some political elites gained opportunities through these gatherings to secure political support by emphasizing the ethnicity and religion of the majority.

Methods

This research employs a qualitative methodology with a case study approach and literature review to investigate political and ethnic dynamics surrounding religious rallies. The case study method is chosen for its ability to provide a comprehensive understanding of complex social phenomena within their real-life contexts. Hays (in DeMarrais & Lapan, 2004) explained that case study research examines topics, issues, and programs. As most case study research is done, the data collection involves more qualitative data. This research focuses on the 411 and 212 rallies on Ahok's blasphemy case in Indonesia. Also, content analysis through reading materials, such as literature and online newspapers—is conducted to understand their activities and influence on the study case (Lune & Berg, 2017). The literature review plays a critical role in this research by offering a theoretical framework and context for the case studies. The discussion focuses on anti-Chinese sentiments, democracy and rallies, and its implication on ethnic minority's political chances in Indonesia. The data from the case studies is analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes, patterns, and contradictions, enabling a nuanced understanding of the experiences and challenges faced by ethnic minorities, mainly those engaged in political discourse.

Results

Understanding Democracy and Rallies from Circumstantialism Approach

Democratization in Indonesia is marked by significant public participation in democratic processes, particularly in times of election. This engagement is exemplified by the "Pesta Demokrasi" or "Democracy Party," a celebration of the transition from dictatorship to democracy since the late 1990s (Suhartono et al., 2024). One of the focal points of political expression often manifested in street demonstrations and rallies.

Historically, rallies in Indonesia were often intertwined with political and social changes. Reformasi Movement in 1998, for example, involved Indonesian students rallying to address political reforms, economic outcries, and the eradication of corruption (J. P. Tehusijarana, 2023). Post 1998, street rallies took up various issues, including human rights abuses, corruption, environmental concerns, and labor. For example, the Omnibus Law Protest in 2020 demanded the Omnibus Law adhere to labor rights and environmental protection (Aspinall, 2020). Ethnic and religious rallies, similarly, have also played a significant role in the country's socio-political landscape, often reflecting its population's diverse beliefs, cultures, and demographics. The recent Interfaith Rally for Palestine in 2023, for instance, gathered thousands of people at the National Monument in Jakarta for an interfaith rally supporting Palestine (Simangunsong, 2023), held akin to the 411 and 212 religious rallies for Ahok's blasphemy case.

Throughout the 411 and 212 rallies in 2016, protesters demanded Ahok's arrest for insulting the Qur'an. Anti-Chinese sentiments and ethnic identity differences were apparent from the use of banners and posters that mention the word *pribumi* (meaning local/native Indonesian) and *Cina*—this word refers to Chinese ethnic but contains a more derogative, pejorative meaning—highlighting the ethnicity and societal divisions. Apart from the ethnicity issue, Ahok's case occurred during the election period for the governor's position in the capital city, Jakarta. Therefore, there has been a notable attempt to turn these ethnic and religious conflicts into political opportunities.

From the perspective of circumstantialism, "ethnicity was the medium through which various groups organized to pursue their collective interests in competition with one another, an interest that were products of circumstances in which those groups found themselves" (Cornell & Hartmann, 2007). Imbued with political nuances, Ahok's blasphemy case and the reemergent of anti-Chinese sentiment advantaged his political opponents at that time, Anies

Baswedan-Sandiga Uno, who then won the 2017 election. As part of their political communication strategy, the opponents utilized their ethnic and religious proximity during their campaign to gain more voters, such as wearing *petji* (a male head attribute related to Indonesia's local and Islamic religion). Using such identity politics as a tool for electoral gain can have long-term consequences for the political landscape, as it legitimizes exclusionary practices and undermines efforts to build an inclusive and pluralistic society.

Figure 1.

Anies and Sandiaga Uno wearing *petji* during Governor's election in 2017



Source: Carina, 2017

Moreover, The Jakarta Post reported that during the mass gathering, the 2019 presidential candidate Prabowo Subianto was also present (K. M. Tehusijarana, 2018). Prabowo is known as a populist political figure who actively shows anti-foreign domination and anti-Chinese sentiments in his speeches. The rally was joined by a phone call from Rizieq Shihab, the Islam Defender Front (FPI) leader. He advised his supporters not to choose Blasphemer's supporters for the upcoming presidential and legislative elections (K. M. Tehusijarana, 2018). His statement indirectly encourages the existing anti-Chinese sentiments directed towards the Chinese ethnic minority in the political arena. Also, it emphasizes the power of ethnicity and religion of the majority.

Discussion

Contextualizing the Origins of Anti-Chinese Sentiments in Indonesia

There are many arguments regarding the first settlement of Chinese migrants in Indonesia. Kosasih (2010) explained that the first Chinese migration happened in the fifteenth century under the command of Admiral Zheng He. This first wave was mainly related to trading and

voyages. In the 19th century, the second wave of Chinese migrants came to Indonesia, followed by the third wave in the 20th century, driven by the Chinese Civil Wars and the Sino-Japanese War.

However, Tarling (in Turner, 2003) argued that the Chinese first arrived in Indonesia in the seventeenth century. They came to Batavia (now Jakarta) during the Dutch colonialism. This migration was believed to be economically driven; they came to monopolize the economic prospects in the region. According to Mackie and Coppel (in Turner, 2003), four primary ethnic Chinese groups came to Indonesia, predominantly from Fujian and Guangdong in Southeast China. These four groups were Hokkien, Teochiu, Hakka, and Cantonese. They mainly occupied the trade, machinery, and agriculture sectors in Indonesia. Some early settlers could assimilate with the local/native Indonesians (*pribumi*) through intermarriage and learning local languages. Some descendants also had mixed identities, practicing customs and traditions inherited by their Chinese fathers and Indonesian mothers (Kosasih, 2010). The relationship between Chinese Indonesians and *pribumi* has remained uncertain despite the assimilation efforts.

The discussion on anti-Chinese sentiment started from the early settlement of Chinese migrants in Indonesia. Under Dutch rule, a social class system divided society into several classes. This social class created tension by categorizing Chinese migrants into the Foreign and Orientals category in the second class, while native Indonesians/*pribumi* occupied lower in the third class. The Dutch colonials were also implementing occupational and residential segregation for Chinese migrants in specific regions called *Pecinan* (Chinatowns) and *Kampung Cina* (Chinese villages) (Kosasih, 2010). These policies hindered the assimilation process and created a social gap. In the economic sectors, the Chinese were seen as the partners of trade and business of VOC (Dutch colonial trading company) to assist them in cultivating agricultural products from native *pribumi*.

Ever since, economic and social disparities became apparent between Chinese migrants and the *pribumi*, which then grew into mistrust, judgment, and discrimination towards Chinese Indonesians. They were seen as colonial puppets and a threat to monopolize the economy that once belonged to the *pribumi*. The stereotypes of Chinese Indonesians as economically privileged and as economic predators in Indonesia have been evident even today. Even though many Chinese Indonesians are poor and reside in rural areas, many

Indonesians still associate Chinese Indonesians with economic domination, which led to their marginalization (Lan, 2009).

The prolonged mistrust of Chinese Indonesians was worsened during the communist-related coup d'état in 1965. As Beijing was accused of its involvement in spreading communism, this conflict then led to nationwide ethnic violence directed toward ethnic Chinese in Indonesia (Lan, 2009). During the New Order regime under Suharto, the violence and anti-Chinese sentiments were still visible. The fear of Chinese Indonesians' economic, cultural, and political domination over the *pribumi* mainly caused negative sentiments (Herlijanto, 2016). Thus, the political participation of Chinese Indonesians in the government was nearly impossible, at least not until the May 1998 riot that marked the democratization of Indonesia and a turning point for Chinese Indonesians in Indonesian political discourse.

Chinese Indonesians in the Local Political Narratives: The Concept of 'Otherness'

The concept of otherness in multicultural society reflects the construction of ethnic Chinese-identity in Indonesian society. Otherness in a multicultural society refers to how specific individuals or groups are defined as different or outside the norm, often leading to their marginalization or exclusion. In an increasingly global world, the diminishing boundaries between people, cultures, and countries have resulted in human relationships with 'others.' Our imagination often regards 'otherness' as something "alien," "dissimilar," "inconvenient," "undesirable," and "unwanted" (Strumska-Cylwik, 2013). AbdulMagied (2020) posits that in multicultural societies, the process of othering occurs when certain groups are deliberately excluded from the dominant narratives of their community. This concept intertwined with power dynamics, identity formation, and social interactions.

According to the constructionist approach, identity construction includes the establishment of characterizations that set the group member apart from the non-group member; this set of characteristics includes skin color, ancestry, place of origin, cultural practice, or else (Cornell & Hartmann, 2007). Race and religion are some of the prominent distinctions in identity construction. Those belonging to native/*pribumi* should possess the racial characteristics of indigenous Indonesians and Muslims. While the majority of Chinese Indonesians have different racial features and non-Muslims, this gives them a sense of alienation even though they were born and raised in Indonesia. Even the forced assimilation that required Chinese Indonesians to change their name into more *pribumi*-sounding names

(Kosasih, 2010) has failed to cease the 'othering' of Chinese Indonesians. Quoting Suryadinata (in Kosasih, 2010), local Indonesians perceived them as "too Chinese to be Indonesian and too Indonesian to be Chinese."

In the political arena, this conception led to sentiments that questioned their political loyalty to Indonesia and their 'perceived' intention for economic domination, even when they belonged to an ethnic minority (Aditjondro in Herlijanto, 2016). Consequently, post-1965 and during the New Order regime, the political movement of Chinese Indonesians was closely monitored, and there were almost no political representatives in the government. Interestingly, however, ethnic Chinese seemed to thrive in the economic sector, with some Chinese business tycoons enjoying protections and economic monopolies from Suharto (Turner, 2003). These cronyism practices have deepened the resentment of Indonesians towards Chinese ethnic, particularly during the financial crisis in the late 1990s, which led to the May 1998 riot.

Democratization became the turning point for Chinese Indonesians. After the downfall of the Suharto regime in 1998 and onwards, there have been some efforts to abolish the discrimination against Chinese Indonesians. The presidential decrees, such as erasing the terms *pri and non-pri* (shortened from *pribumi and non-pribumi*) from the official and business policies (Presidential Instruction No.26/1998) and revoking the restriction of the practices of Chinese customs and traditions into a private domain (Presidential Decree No. 6/2000) are enforced into law (Lan, 2009). Also, the participation of Chinese Indonesians in politics has increased since the democratization, which became a positive indicator of the political atmosphere in Indonesia.

Some of the political representatives, such as Kwik Kian Gie (Coordinator of the Ministry for Economics and Finance during President Abdurrahman Wahid and President Megawati's governments) and Mari Pangestu (Ministry of Industry and Trade during President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's administration) have started to appear in Indonesian politics, even though their involvement mainly were personal rather than as ethnic community representatives (Lan, 2009). Equally important, the number of Chinese Indonesians running for election has significantly increased. For instance, Christianity Sanjaya for Vice Governor in West Kalimantan, Goh Tjong Ping in Tuban, Yansen Akun Effendy, who might have Chinese blood in Sanggau District, Fify Lety Indra, who is a female lawyer and of

Chinese descent in Pangkal Pinang, Rudianto Tjen, Hidayat Arsani, Ahok, and many more (Lan, 2009).

Nevertheless, the involvement of Chinese Indonesians in local politics remains pro-contra. Several cases have proven that the public is still reluctant to accept Chinese Indonesians in local politics. For instance, the conflict happened in the Pontianak region after Christian Sanjaya was elected as Vice Governor (Lan, 2009), and the case of the racist statement of Priyo Budi Santoso towards Goh Tjong Ping, which stated that Goh is “not an appropriate name” for Head of Tuban District candidate (Juven in (Lan, 2009)). This conflict also showed that the sentiment is still profoundly engraved that Chinese Indonesians in politics will only empower their economic monopoly and not represent ‘true’ Indonesians.

Ahok’s blasphemy case was one example worth looking at. The anti-Chinese sentiment and fear of Chinese domination through Ahok’s administration that was stirred by local political elites had been circulating even before the blasphemy case went viral. Nazaruddin Sjamsuddin (former chairperson of the General Election Commission), for instance, expressed his concern about Ahok’s policies that, in his view, were disadvantaging the poor residents of Jakarta (Herlijanto, 2016). Also, suspicions about the reclamation project in the Bay of Jakarta that involved Mandarin advertisement of the apartment complex have heightened fears of a possible alliance between ethnic Chinese, Ahok, and China (Herlijanto, 2016). Observably, the 411 and 212 have portrayed a shifting nature from religious to more politically driven gathering to secure power by ‘othering’ through ethnic and religious differences.

Conclusion

To conclude, the anti-Chinese sentiments are still apparent in current Indonesian society. These existing assumptions and ‘othering’ of Chinese Indonesians have also affected their opportunities in Indonesian political discourse. The case of Ahok’s blasphemy and the religious rallies that intertwined with ethnic issues exemplify how these sentiments can be exploited by political elites to serve their collective interests, often at the expense of fostering inclusive and equitable political participation. Political elites usually exploit societal divisions by framing political narratives that resonate with the majority’s identity, such as religious and ethnic identity. This strategy involves highlighting the ‘otherness’ of candidates who do not share the majority’s ethnic or religious background, thereby questioning their suitability to lead based on perceived differences rather than their policies or qualifications.

This phenomenon not only highlights the vulnerabilities of ethnic minorities within the political arena but also underscores the need for a broader examination of their involvement. Future studies must delve deeper into the evolving dynamics of political participation among underrepresented groups in Indonesia, including those defined by gender, sexual orientation, religion, and socio-economic status. These diverse communities often encounter unique challenges navigating Indonesia's complex socio-political landscape.

Exploring these groups' experiences will provide a more comprehensive understanding of their various barriers, such as social stigma, legal restrictions, and limited access to resources and networks. This broader analysis can uncover how these marginalized communities strive for political representation and participation, shedding light on their strategies to overcome these challenges. By expanding the scope of research to include multiple dimensions of identity, scholars can offer a more nuanced perspective on political engagement in Indonesia, providing a more comprehensive understanding of their political engagement and the factors that either facilitate or hinder their involvement.

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