

An Indonesian tsunami?

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Indonesia's largest Islamic organisation the Nahdlatul Ulama has said that religion and ethnicity should never be made an issue in a democratic society

A very interesting event occurred a few hundred miles from our most southern border, the Nicobar Islands. In Indonesia, direct gubernatorial elections for its capital and largest city, Jakarta, were held a few weeks ago. They went through two runs, the first eliminating all but the top two candidates, and the next, of course, electing the Governor and his Deputy. Jakarta has a population of 10 million as of November 2011 and is 17th among the world's 200 largest cities

In the race were two main contenders and their associated Deputy Governor candidates. The more powerful of them, and one who represented the Establishment, was incumbent Governor Fauzi (Foke) Bowo, aged 63. He was a civil servant and politician and had the support of many Muslim religious leaders, academics and, of course, city officials.

Most of Indonesia's major political parties supported him, and they included the powerful Golkar Party, a member of the governing coalition of President Yudhoyono's national government. Bowo was counting on his 'native lad' image and on what he had accomplished as Governor.

He has some accomplishments: a 12-year compulsory education program, lower unemployment, higher per capita income. He is quoted as saying: "I'm trying to reach out to more people, consolidating my networks that are already established, and restructuring my campaign strategy to be more down to earth". His claim was that Jakarta was one of the world's megacities and experience and capacity were needed to be its Governor and manage its US \$ 4.3 billion (Rs 22,000 crores) annual budget.

The rival candidate was also a Governor- but of the city of Surakarta (better known as "Solo") in Central Java. He is Joko Widodo, aged 51, a forestry engineer by training and a furniture exporter by occupation. He had the support of the former President Megawati Sukarnoputri, daughter of President Sukarno. He was also backed by the four-year old Great Indonesia Movement Party and reportedly funded by it also.

He was serving his second term as Governor of Solo, which he had won in 2010 with 90.9% of the votes cast. He would retire there in 2015. By all account, his Governorship in Solo saw tremendous development and cleaning up of the city and he entered the short list of candidates for the World Mayor 2011 title.

He is said to have made Solo the best city in Indonesia. He relocated street vendors to ease traffic congestion and introduced a modern tram system. He streamlined business applications, increased access to health services and cleaned up slums - the last, a major issue in Jakarta also.

His campaign was unusual and it used all the modern tools available to spread his message but the word of what he did for Solo seems to have been the most potent reason for Jakarta citizens voting for him. His running mate as Deputy Governor was equally unusual. Basuki ("Ahok") Tjahaja Purnama is not a Muslim. Moreover, he is Chinese Christian - one of the prosperous minorities that dominate business sector and generally not liked by Indonesians envious of their prosperity.

This gave the opposition a handle and an anti-Chinese and anti-Christian slant (in a Muslim-majority nation) was manifest in the campaign against him and his running mate. This seems not to have worked for various reasons. One voter was reported to have said: "In my neighborhood there were these fliers telling us not to vote for Jokowi - Ahok because Ahok is not Muslim and he's Chinese and Christian. The fliers said really nasty things about them and how we must vote for Foke.

I vote according to my conscience, not because of the promise of money or what some awful fliers tell us. These people must think we're stupid." In his arrogance, Foke is reported to have said: "Betawis (locals traditionally living in Java and around Jakarta) that didn't vote for him, should get out of Jakarta".

The voters seem naturally to have taken this amiss. "I mean, who does he think he is? Jakarta doesn't belong to him," said one citizen. But vote bank politics goes on all over and, in Jakarta, the break-up was seen on these lines too. Chinese are 10% of the population of Jakarta but the remainder is Muslim, with 45% of Jakarta's population from Java and the rest from other parts of Indonesia.

Muslim groups have called Basuki an "infidel" and, therefore, he should not become a leader in a Muslim country. But Indonesia's largest Islamic organisation the Nahdlatul Ulama has said that religion and ethnicity should never be made an issue in a democratic society. Its chairman Said Aqil Siradj told an Indonesian newspaper that religious and ethnic slurs are no longer suitable in the present-day context of democratic Indonesia.

Interestingly, Basuki's ethnic and religious background did not seem to bother a majority of the voters. As Iberamsjah, a political expert from the University of Indonesia, told an Indonesian newspaper: "If a non-Muslim can be accepted in the capital, he or she should be accepted across the country. Don't be surprised if more good quality leaders from the minority groups emerge." So finally, in the first round Joko Widodo and Basuki got 43% against the incumbent's 34 %, and in the final round received the 54% needed to put him and his running mate into office.

Joko is reported as saying: "I am ready to work hard and at a high speed to keep up with the working dynamics of the Jakarta city administration. I will do everything that I conveyed during the campaign. I'm ready to issue unpopular policies for a greater cause, which is to benefit the people of Jakarta. I'm used to that." The most important problem he will have to face is corruption. Indonesia is notorious for this. Even the President, with his campaign against it, has not been able to make much headway against an entrenched bureaucracy and clamp down on corruption.

Interestingly, some of his electors in Solo have filed a suit claiming damages from Joko for abandoning them midway through his term as Governor of Solo. They say they don't want to lose Joko. How many politicians can claim that! The Indonesians are very proud of their Hindu and Buddhist past and the great empires they built, such as Sri Vijaya, Sailendra and Majapahit, that dominated South East Asia. Yet, Indonesia also has an Islamic fundamentalist movement – the Jemaah Islamiya - which wants a Darul Islam in South East Asia.

Its origins lie in the period 1948-62 when it waged guerilla war against the infant Republic. This terrorist organization, linked to Al-Qaeda, was responsible for the Bali bombings in 2002 and 2005 as well as those in Jakarta in 2003, 2004 and 2009. Given this background and the current situation, the election of a Muslim and Christian to govern the capital city is a relief to secular forces in Indonesia. Yet, as we have seen in Egypt, the fact that an elected Vice President of the country was a Coptic Christian is no assurance of religious tolerance.

However, Indonesia has an 1800-year tradition of polytheism and has coped reasonably with different beliefs and will probably do so in the future.

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