

Religion Card Losing Power in Muslim-Dominated Indonesia's Politics

Indonesia's most populous province has re-elected its conservative Muslim governor, but by such a narrow margin that it suggests the religious card may be losing its power to win votes in the world's largest Islamic society.

Last week's West Java election, the results of which were announced this week, comes amid criticism that while President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's government has largely tamed **Islamic militants**, it is standing aside as religious hardliners muscle into the mainstream political debate ahead of next year's presidential and general election.

West Java, a heavily industrialized region next to the capital, **Jakarta**, has in recent years seen violent attacks on Christian churches and members of the Ahmadiyya sect, a minority considered heretical by some Muslims.

There were numerous media reports that the re-elected governor, Ahmad Heryawan, whose campaign promoted an "Islamic environment" in the overwhelmingly **Muslim** province, had agreed with a vigilante group to ban the Ahmadiyya if he won again.

Officials at Heryawan's office were unable to say whether the reports were correct, and Heryawan could not be reached for comment.

In the end, Heryawan's winning margin dropped to just over the minimum 30 percent needed to win, well down from 40 percent five years ago.

"Many parties are now trying to become a middle ground party. **Indonesia** is very diverse and parties who support that

diversity will get votes,” said Airlangga Hartarto, a member of parliament with the secular Golkar party.

“The new generation of voters is more plugged into the global market and culture, and jobs and quality of living are the priorities for these voters.”

Close to two-thirds of the world’s fourth biggest population is under 35 and starting to enjoy the fruits of living in one of the world’s fastest-growing economies.

In an election last year for governor of Jakarta, rivals tried to turn voters against the front-runner by pointing out that his running mate was both ethnic Chinese and Christian. The pair won the race easily.

Pragmatic

A prominent political analyst and vice-presidential adviser, Dewi Fortuna Anwar, said Islam was becoming a more potent factor in a society in which nearly 90 percent of the people consider themselves Muslims.

“But in politics, most Indonesians still look at more pragmatic problems,” she said.

It did not help Governor Heryawan that the national leaders of his Muslim-based Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) were facing a major investigation around the time of the election over their alleged role in a beef import scandal.

“Corruption scandals ... do have an impact on voters at the local and national level,” said Dian Permata, researcher at the Freedom House think tank.

“(Religious parties) have presented themselves as being pious and clean, but now there is a migration of voters away from Islamic parties toward so-called nationalist parties.”

Religious parties made a comeback in Indonesia’s era of democratic reform after the fall in 1998 of authoritarian

leader, Suharto. But according to data from the general election commission, support for the main Islamic parties dropped nearly 10 percent, to 24 percent of the national vote, between elections in 2004 and 2009.

By late 2012, this support had diminished further to less than 10 percent, according to one independent survey.

“Religion is just not part of the main issue for voters anymore ... and most parties should realize that,” said Hasto Kristianto, deputy secretary general of the main opposition party, the Indonesian Democratic Party-Struggle (PDI-P).

Reporting by Jakarta bureau; editing by Jonathan Thatcher and Robert Birsel.

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