

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Asia > Indonesia & West Papua > Fundamentalism, sharia, religion (Indonesia) > **Indonesia: Protests in Jakarta after Christian governor convicted of blasphemy**

Indonesia: Protests in Jakarta after Christian governor convicted of blasphemy

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Religious tolerance under scrutiny as court sentences Basuki Tjahaja Purnama - nicknamed Ahok - to two years in prison.

The jailing of Jakarta's Christian governor on blasphemy charges has sparked outrage from his supporters in Indonesia, rights organisations and the EU.

On Tuesday, a court in the capital of the world's largest Muslim-majority country found Basuki Tjahaja Purnama - better known by his nickname Ahok - guilty of blasphemy, sentencing him to two years in prison.

"The EU has consistently stated that laws that criminalise blasphemy when applied in a discriminatory manner can have a serious inhibiting effect on freedom of expression and on freedom of religion or belief," the EU delegation to Indonesia and Brunei Darussalam said in a statement posted on its website.

The Jakarta-based rights group the Setara Institute described the verdict as a "trial by mob", while the British ambassador to Indonesia, Moazzam Malik, who is Muslim, tweeted a message of support.

At City Hall on Wednesday morning, an estimated 1,000 people wearing red and white, Indonesia's national colours, gathered for a spontaneous choir performance in support of Ahok.

Conducted by the musician Addie MS, the crowd sang the national anthem, Indonesia Raya, and Pancasila Garuda, a song about Indonesia's founding principles of unity and diversity.

Others registered their opposition to the verdict and sentencing by tweeting under the hashtag #RIPHukumIndonesia, which means "rest in peace Indonesian law".

The Ahok case has been watched closely as a marker of the commitment to religious tolerance and pluralism in Indonesia, where religious hardliners have been playing an increasingly prominent role in politics.

In an unusual move, the panel of five judges on Tuesday dismissed the prosecutor's recommendations to drop the initial blasphemy charges due to insufficient evidence.

Prosecutors had recommended the governor instead face a sentence of two years' probation, and one year in jail if he reoffended. But the judges - citing among others the "expert" opinion of an Islamic vigilante group leader - said they found the minority governor convincingly guilty of blasphemy, incarcerating him for two years.

Ahok for months faced the wrath of hardline Islamists after he cited a Qur'anic verse on the

campaign trail last September. The verse, he said, had been manipulated by some religious leaders to justify the claim the Muslims should not vote for non-Muslim leaders.

Uproar over an edited version of the speech that went viral spilled into a series of angry mass rallies spearheaded by Islamists since late last year, and has catalysed the deepening of religious and ethnic divides in the capital.

Some observers argue that religious hardliners may have swayed the Indonesian judiciary.

International human rights organisations including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch said the verdict would tarnish Indonesia's reputation for religious tolerance and pluralism, and urged the country to repeal its "unjust" blasphemy law. Ahok has indicated he will appeal against the ruling.

Kate Lamb in Jakarta

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<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/10/jakarta-protests-christian-governor-ahok-guilty-blasphemy>