

Why the Jakarta election could change the face of Indonesia



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Incumbent Jakarta Governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, right, and his deputy Djarot Saiful Hidayat pose for photographers at a campaign rally in Jakarta, Indonesia on February 11.

Story highlights

Wednesday's election could change the role religion plays in Indonesian politics

Chinese Christian governor Ahok faces voters while on trial for blasphemy

(CNN) It's the vote that could change Indonesia.

The country's capital Jakarta goes to the polls on Wednesday, February 15, to elect a new governor.

At stake is more than just who governs the sprawling, chaotic metropolis of 30 million people.

The contest between Chinese Christian incumbent, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, commonly known as Ahok, and his two Muslim opponents has raised questions over whether Indonesia, the largest Muslim nation on earth, will remain a moderate Muslim society.

It could even determine who will be the next President of Indonesia after the 2019 national election.

A result won't be known for two weeks and if no one wins a majority, a second round of voting will take place on April 19.

"If (incumbent) Ahok was to lose, other than politicians using religion as a tool, Islamists will use it to change Islam into Indonesia to their own meaning, that isn't Indonesian," Center for Strategic and International Studies Indonesia researcher Tobias Basuki told CNN.

"They will gain an upper hand. (This) will be the first litmus test."



Indonesians hold a demonstration in support of Muslim clerics at the National Monument in Jakarta on February 5, 2017.

Rise of conservatism

Indonesia is called home by more than 200 million Muslims -- [87% of the population](#).

But with the exception of the severely religious Aceh province, Indonesia is generally a moderate country with a tolerance for other religions and ways of life.

"Indonesia's political Islam is very different from the Middle East -- for example, non-Muslim leaders of a Muslim majority is normal, intermarriage is accepted," Basuki said.

However experts says Indonesia is becoming increasingly conservative, with large anti-LGBT protests in Jakarta and passionate reactions to allegations of blasphemy commonplace in recent years.