



Indonesia's Strange Kind of Justice

He was the Governor of Jakarta, Indonesia's capital city. In an election held in April, however, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama lost his prestigious and powerful post. Was it because he was incompetent? Was he guilty of some form of corruption, a common finding in some other Asian nations? Was he afflicted with ill health or advancing age? No, none of those reasons led to his defeat.

Mr. Basuki's downfall resulted from a statement he made about the Koran in the nation, which has the largest Muslim population on earth. What happened is that Basuki's opponents claimed that the Koran, the Muslim holy book, forbids Muslims to vote for a non-Muslim. Basuki is a Christian and his response to that attack included a claim that the [Koran](#) issued no such directive. Immediately, he was charged with blasphemy for insulting the Koran, a serious crime in this predominantly Muslim nation.

Whether the Koran does or doesn't forbid Muslims from choosing a non-Muslim in a political race isn't this writer's place to determine. What is of interest is that Basuki had been leading in the polls and was expected to win over Anies Baswedan, a former minister of education who is a Muslim.

One month after being defeated, an Indonesian court found Basuki guilty of blasphemy for his claim. Quickly sentenced to two years in prison in a unanimous decision by the court's five judges, the former governor of Jakarta now languishes in a prison housing drug dealers, rapists, and other convicts. Indonesian law allows for him to appeal, but not to remain free while his plea is considered. Prosecutors in the case had recommended probation but even they were overruled.

The incident provides a good reminder of the way any similar slur or contrary interpretation aimed at religion is handled in America. Insulting or misinterpreting someone's religious view is fairly common here, even growing more common. Doing so may properly lead to voter rejection of a candidate seeking office. But immediate prison is impossible thanks to the Constitution's Bill of Rights.

Human Rights Watch's Andreas Harsono, an Indonesian researcher, called the verdict and sentence given Basuki "a sad day, even a frightening day." He added: "If the governor of Indonesia's largest and most complex city, who is an ally of the Indonesian president, can be brought down and humiliated in this way, what will happen to ordinary Indonesian citizens?" Good question.

The incident in Indonesia should help all Americans appreciate what they have in the U.S. Constitution. Here, slurring or misinterpreting another's [religious views](#) (deliberately or mistakenly) may hurt or boost a candidacy. But it won't result in being sent to prison.



Written by [John F. McManus](#) on May 22, 2017

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