

Indonesian Christian leader jailed under blasphemy law

by [Celeste Kennel-Shank](#) in the [June 7, 2017](#) issue



Basuki Tjahaja Purnama. [Some rights reserved](#) by [s'tar photo](#).

Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, an Indonesian Protestant whose popularity as a politician in the world's largest Muslim nation appeared to be a sign of interreligious tolerance, was convicted of blasphemy and sentenced to two years in jail.

The head judge of the Jakarta court sentenced him on May 9, according to news reports. Last year Basuki had accused his political opponents of using a verse of the Qur'an deceptively "to say Muslims should not be led by a non-Muslim," Reuters reported. "An incorrectly subtitled video of his comments later went viral, helping spark huge demonstrations that ultimately resulted in him being brought to trial."

Basuki, who is known by his nickname, Ahok, has been governor of the Indonesian capital, Jakarta, and its surrounding region since 2014, leading about 40 million people in the nation of 250 million. He lost the election for another term as governor in April. His current term ends in October.

Philip Jenkins, a professor of history at Baylor University, who writes the Notes from the Global Church column for the *Christian Century*, [wrote last year about Ahok's rise from mining engineer to politician working alongside Muslim leaders](#), including a stint as a deputy governor to Joko Widodo, who is now Indonesia's president.

In building alliances with the large moderate Muslim groups Nadhlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, Ahok "has been walking a delicate path the whole way," Jenkins said the day after the court's ruling. "They have always been listed as being the great moderate forces. But they had been hearing a lot of discontent within their membership," he said. "And they felt that they couldn't support Ahok."

Disagreements between moderate and hard-line Muslims tapped into fears about secularization, globalization, Western media, the role of women, and other concerns, Jenkins said, noting that it is crucial to clarify that Western categories of moderate and extremist, which focus on violence, do not apply to many Muslims.

"You can be a very, very conservative religious Muslim who is against violence, but you can still be very strict in these legal religious issues," Jenkins said. "NU and Muhammadiyah have worked very hard against some of the hard-line groups in Indonesia. But once you get into areas of blasphemy and apostasy—they're very conservative."

Muslim moderates can't ignore a charge of blasphemy or appear to be soft on it, he said. Merely being charged with blasphemy can destroy a person's career.

"This is such a tragedy in so many ways," Jenkins said. "What the whole affair comes across to me as is a major warning to moderates in Islam that Indonesia is still a Muslim country and there are limits to how moderate they can feasibly be."

*This article was edited on May 24 to reflect the news that [Basuki withdrew his appeal of the blasphemy sentence](#).*