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Religion as an Electoral Tool: A Comparative Analysis of India and Indonesia

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Religion and politics have long had a complex and interdependent relationship in several nation states. This interplay is particularly interesting in the case of democracies. India and Indonesia are two such examples. The election of Yogi Adityanath in India this year was followed closely by the defeat of former Jakarta Governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, also known as Ahok, in Indonesia. These two 'religiously-tinged' events have brought to the fore the issue of religion in politics in the respective countries. This paper argues that the political system in each of these two countries has given rise to mechanisms which allow for the 'indirect' use of religion as an electoral tool. However, power and office have a moderating influence on extreme religious ideologies.

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Introduction

In the first quarter of 2017, India and Indonesia witnessed important events in their respective political arenas. India's most populous State, Uttar Pradesh (UP), went to the polls and the victorious Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which rules at the Centre too, appointed Yogi Adityanath the state's chief minister. The appointment raised many an eyebrow as Adityanath, a Hindu 'hardline' priest, has frequently voiced anti-Muslim sentiments, and, significantly, UP has a large Muslim minority. A few weeks after Adityanath took office, the incumbent Christian Governor of Jakarta, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (commonly referred to as Ahok) was ousted from power amid a turbulent election marked by allegations against him of committing blasphemy against Islam, the country's majority religion.

India and Indonesia are classified as electoral democracies, located in the South Asian and Southeast Asian regions respectively. The two aforementioned incidents have cast a veritable spotlight on the recurrent issue of the role of religion within the political spectrum of these two states.

India and Indonesia: Parallels across the Board

India and Indonesia share some broad historical and demographic traits. Both underwent prolonged periods of colonial rule and, ultimately, transitioned to democracy following the overthrow of colonialism and autocratic rule respectively. On the demographic front, both countries have significantly large populations, with India having around 1.3 billion citizens and Indonesia nearly 260 million. Additionally, India and Indonesia are alike in that each has a significant religious majority (almost 80 per cent of Indians are Hindu while nearly 90 per cent of Indonesians are Muslims). Both states have constitutions that require the state to be secular, i.e., not promote any religion to the status of a state religion. Interestingly, both countries also showcase significant levels of religiosity. A 2009 Gallup poll on religiosity in various countries indicated that 90 per cent of Indians and 99 per cent of Indonesians

considered religion as an important part of their lives.² Lastly, both states have attained a respectable standard of electoral democracy, as evident in the development of indicators such as free and fair elections, civil society activism and the presence of free media. They also share certain similarities in their challenges such as the narratives of crippling corruption and an overburdened judiciary. As such, they serve as comparative case studies for the analysis of religion in politics.

Religious Politics in India: The UP Election and the politics of Hindu Majoritarianism

India, the world's largest democracy, has been a crucible of religious exploration and is the wellspring of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. Islam became the state religion in India during the Sultanate and Mughal era. However, Hinduism is the cornerstone of Indian society. Indeed, the geographical Persian term 'Hindustan' (often colloquially used to describe India) can be ultimately traced to the Hindu-origin occupants of the Indian subcontinent. From a modern constitutional viewpoint, India is 'secular' and not governed by the tenets of any religious ideology. What role then, does religion play in India's political space? India is a religiously diverse and devout society with a vast population. Places of worship, festivals and pilgrimages routinely attract millions of devotees; spiritual belief and devotion are often taken very seriously and, sometimes, to extremes. The sum of these factors results in the inevitable linking of religious sentiment to political representation or what may be called (religion-based) 'identity politics'.

Hinduism is intrinsically linked to the Indian political experience. Indeed, as Mani Shankar Aiyar points out, the argument for deploying Hinduism to define the Indian state is at the 'the very root of all politics in India'.³ At the national level, the incumbent BJP is the most

² Gallup, 'Religiosity Highest in World's Poorest Nations', Available at: <http://www.gallup.com/pol/142727/religiosity-highest-world-poorest-nations.aspx>. Accessed on 3 June 2017.

³ Aiyar, M (2007). Politics and Religion in India. India International Centre Quarterly, [online] 34(1), pp.42-50. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org.libproxy1.nus.edu.sg/stable/pdf/23006045.pdf> Accessed on 4 June 2017.

significant example of Hindu political representation. The BJP's identification with the ideological baggage of 'Hindutva' or 'Hinduness' derives from its close relationship with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, a social organization, manned by full-time activists, aimed at promoting Hindu values. The party comprises almost entirely of Hindu representatives. While previously in power, during 1999-2004, under the leadership of Prime Minister Vajpayee, the BJP swung between a moderate ideological approach and a stronger pro-Hindu policy. Following the ascension of L K Advani as president of the party in 1984, the 'Ram Janmabhoomi' movement (Restoration of the Birthplace of Ram) took centre-stage and became part of the BJP's election manifesto. Actions in favour of the movement eventually culminated in the destruction of the Babri Masjid, which sowed the seeds for long-term discord between the BJP and India's largest minority group, the Muslims. Against this backdrop, the UP election threw up a paradoxical situation in that the BJP won many Muslim constituencies. This event thus offers some insight into the role of religion (as an electoral instrument) in modern Indian democracy.

The UP State election in 2017 was a markedly momentous occasion for the BJP. The religious tone of the party's electoral campaign was evident from Prime Minister Narendra Modi's stark declaration that, "Villages with Muslim graveyards should also have Hindu crematoriums."⁴ The fact that the BJP did not field a single Muslim candidate in that election, although Muslims constitute about one-fifth of the population of UP, underlined the party's confidence about winning without Muslim support.⁵ Significantly, however, the election results showed the BJP winning convincingly in several Muslim-dominated constituencies such as Deoband, Muzzafarnagar and Meerapur. The BJP has interpreted this as a conclusive proof that it has indeed transcended the Hindu-Muslim divide.⁶ While the

⁴ *The Indian Express*, 'PM Narendra Modi's 'kabristan' comment meant to polarise voters: Sitaram Yechury', Available at: <http://indianexpress.com/elections/uttar-pradesh-assembly-elections-2017/pm-narendra-modis-kabristan-comment-meant-to-polarise-voters-sitaram-yechury-4534780/>. Accessed on 4 June 2017.

⁵ *Hindustan Times*, 'Uttar Pradesh election: Amit Shah confident BJP's 'tsunami' will sweep the state', Available at: <http://www.hindustantimes.com/assembly-elections/uttar-pradesh-election-amit-shah-confident-bjp-s-tsunami-set-to-sweep-state/story-GUEc9ZYpIwUuR4GcBcK0iK.html> Accessed on 4 July 2017.

⁶ *The Indian Express*, 'UP election results: BJP shining in Muslim stronghold a big setback for Mayawati, Akhilesh Yadav', Available at: <http://indianexpress.com/elections/uttar-pradesh-assembly-elections->

non-selection of Muslim candidates was possibly explained away on those lines, the party's victory was quickly followed by the appointment of Yogi Adityanath, a hardline Hindu priest and a long-time BJP Member of Parliament, as chief minister of the State. This caused much consternation among certain sections of Indian society as Adityanath's track record of vitriolic anti-Muslim speeches is well-known. Previously, even the BJP has had, at times, a tenuous relationship with him.⁷

While it has proclaimed itself to be dedicated solely to the pursuit of national development, the BJP has simultaneously (and adroitly) engaged in selective pro-Hindu policies such as Adityanath's appointment. For example, during the 2014 national election campaign, Modi, then a candidate, had engaged the Hindutva question only indirectly. The party's 2014 election manifesto featured only a single mention of the word Hindu and that too, in the context of the country being a refuge for 'persecuted Hindus'.⁸ However, during the same campaign, an 'aggressive Hindu rhetoric' was pursued by the party leaders in certain regions. In the three years since the election, the party's top leadership has stuck to the development narrative, while at the state level, there have been political actions with religious undertones such as the banning of beef consumption in Maharashtra and the 'saffronisation'⁹ of school curricula. Furthermore, since its election, the BJP has sought to project its 'Hindutva' ideology as one which supposedly represents a 'pro-national' political view. For example, Modi himself classified nationalism and development as being at the core of 'Hindutva' during the 2014 election.¹⁰ The absence of Muslim candidates and the appointment of Adityanath, taken together, arguably provide evidence that the BJP has undertaken what may be termed as a policy of 'nuanced Hindu majoritarianism' within the secular Indian political space. This policy has allowed the BJP to selectively support its religious leanings during elections while simultaneously projecting a more populist,

2017/up-elections-res ults-bjp-shinning-in-muslim-stronghold-a-big-jolt-to-maya-akhilesh-samajwadi-party-bsp-bhartiya-janata-party-uttar-pradesh/ Accessed on 4 July 2017.

⁷ Basu, A (2015). *Violent Conjectures in Democratic India* (pp. 221-224). Cambridge University Press.

⁸ See Election Manifesto 2014, Bharatiya Janata Party. Available at: http://www.bjp.org/image/s/pdf_2014/full_manifesto_english_07.04.2014.pdf Accessed on 6 June 2017.

⁹ 'Saffronisation' is a (mostly pejorative) term used to describe 'Hindu-centric' policies of groups such as the BJP and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. The term is derived from the saffron colored robes of Hindu ascetics.

¹⁰ Palshikar, S (2015). The BJP and Hindu Nationalism: Centrist Politics and Majoritarian Impulses. *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 38(4), 719-735. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2015.1089460>.

inclusive platform. A telling example of this policy is the fact that the BJP did not make known its choice for chief minister *before* the UP election, leaving open to speculation what the results in the Muslim-dominated constituencies might have been, if Adityanath had been projected as the chief ministerial candidate during the campaign period.

Religious Politics in Indonesia: The Jakarta Gubernatorial Election and Islam

Mirroring India's status as a South Asian powerhouse, Indonesia can be described as a Southeast Asian behemoth, being the largest economy and the most-populous state in the region. Historically, Hinduism and Buddhism were introduced to Indonesia as early as the 2nd century CE and Islam in the 14th century. While Indonesia is constitutionally a nation with a uniform (rather than an Islamic) civil code, its laws are guided by the 'Pancasila' ideology which allows for the belief in a singular God. Furthermore, it recognises only six religions, and all others are officially unrecognised. Atheism is mostly viewed negatively by the society and blasphemy is a crime under the law. Section 156a of the Indonesian Penal Code prescribes a jail sentence of up to five years for public acts or expressions which 'principally have the character of being at enmity with, abusing or staining a religion, adhered to in Indonesia.'¹¹ This state of affairs has time and again permeated the political sphere; most recently, in the case of the former Jakarta governor who was accused (and eventually convicted) of blasphemy against Islam.¹²

Significantly, during the pre-democratic 'New Order' era, the administration of then-President Suharto believed that expressly linking Indonesia to Islam would 'endanger national unity'¹³ and took steps to restrict its influence in politics. For example, all Islamic parties were assimilated under one 'umbrella' governmental Islamic party, the Partai

¹¹ Article 156a, Indonesian Penal Code. Available at: http://www.wipo.int/edocs/lexdocs/laws/en/id/id_039en.pdf Accessed on 4 July 2017.

¹² *BBC*, 'Jakarta governor Ahok found guilty of blasphemy', Available at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-39853280> Accessed on 5 July 2017.

¹³ Ramage, D (1996). *INDONESIA AT 50: Islam, Nationalism (and Democracy?)*. *Southeast Asian Affairs*, p 148. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org.libproxy1.nus.edu.sg/stable/27912151>.

Persatuan Pembangunan which was further forced to accept 'Pancasila' as its sole principle. This structure crumbled in the aftermath of the New Order regime, and 20 Islamic parties contested the 1999 election. While Islam in Indonesia has been traditionally viewed as a 'moderate' and 'tolerant' faith, there have been certain hardline tendencies such as those of the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) which was formed in 1998 and aspires to implement Sharia law in Indonesia. While the FPI's activities have brought it much attention from the media, the general public and the government, its membership remains rather insignificant. Overall, democratic Indonesia has not often faced cases of religious politics until the recent Jakarta election, possibly making it a watershed moment in the country's history.

Former Jakarta governor Ahok, who was popular among large sections of the population, was accused of making blasphemous statements during his campaign. The accusations were followed by demonstrations across Indonesia and, ultimately the Indonesian Supreme Court found Ahok guilty of blasphemy and sentenced him to two years in jail. Initially intending to appeal against his sentence, Ahok eventually accepted it 'for the sake of the nation'.¹⁴ However, the issue may still have potentially long-standing political implications for Indonesia.

The politicisation of Islam has taken place in Indonesia from the advent of democracy, alongside upholding the 'Pancasila' principle. Anies Baswedan (Ahok's opponent who is now the Governor of Jakarta) speaking at a conference on 'Political Islam in Southeast Asia' in 2003, had pointed out that political Islam in Indonesia had been "transformed and diversified" and was "no longer equivalent to Islamist aspiration". This was represented by not only political parties using Islam as a "formal platform", but also by parties that were classified as "Islamist, Islam-inclusive, or secular-inclusive".¹⁵ However, the recent proceedings in Jakarta have outlined that, while this prognosis may yet stand, the *use* of Islam through byways such as blasphemy laws can perhaps provide a political avenue for

¹⁴ *The Jakarta Post*, 'Jakarta's former governor Ahok dropping appeal against jail sentence for blasphemy', Available at <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-05-23/jakarta-former-governor-ahok-drops-appeal-against-prison-time/> 855 2070. Accessed on 5 June 2017.

¹⁵ Baswedan, Anies Rasyid (2004) "Political Islam In Indonesia: Present And Future Trajectory". *Asian Survey*, vol 44, no. 5, p 689. University of California Press, doi:10.1525/as.2004.44.5.669.

groups with the aforementioned ‘Islamist aspirations’. Religious minorities in a country which practises predominantly moderate Islam appear to be facing an altogether new situation – the deft use of Islam as a political tool, as may be inferred from the Ahok case. While the prosecution of Ahok was constitutionally valid, reflecting no breach of Indonesian law, it may, however, appeal to hardline extremists. As noted previously, the majority of Indonesians (who are Muslims) identify themselves as devout practitioners of their faith. A 2002 survey conducted by the Centre for the Study of Islam and Society showed that over 65 per cent of the Muslim respondents felt that Islamic government was ideal for Indonesia and just over 70 per cent agreed that the government should enforce Sharia law.¹⁶ Given this context, the large numbers of citizens who protested against Ahok highlight the fact that religious issues can be decisive in elections. Viewed from outside Indonesia, cases of blasphemy in that country have almost always resulted in the conviction of the accused and, more critically, judgments have often been considered to be influenced by public opinion and perception,¹⁷ thus allowing the politicians a ‘simple blueprint’¹⁸ for electoral victory by instigating political fervour on communal issues.

Conclusion

The public domains in India and Indonesia have recently been coloured by political developments with religious overtones. From a broader analytical perspective, these episodes can be classified as the adoption of religion as an indirect electoral tool, albeit in different ways. In the case of India, religion has been co-opted through a (gradually applied) policy of ‘nuanced majoritarianism’, whereas in Indonesia it has taken the form of a religious law combined with public religiosity. The use of religion in these ways has

¹⁶ R William Liddle, ‘New Patterns of Islamic Politics in Democratic Indonesia’, in *Piety and Pragmatism: Trends in Indonesian Islamic Politics*, (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson International Centre, Asia Special Report, no. 1, 2003), Table 2, p 9.

¹⁷ *The New York Times*, ‘Rot at the Core: Blasphemy Verdict in Indonesia Dismays Legal Experts’, Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/11/world/asia/indonesia-blasphemy-governor-jakarta-ahok.html?mcubz=0&r=0> . Accessed on 5 June 2017.

¹⁸ *The Economist*, ‘Indonesia has been mercifully resistant to extremism – until now’, Available at: <http://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21721202-local-election-shows-how-unscrupulous-can-manipulate-religion-win-office-indonesia-has?frsc=dg%7Cd>. Accessed on 6 June 2017.

possibly wide-ranging implications for India and Indonesia in the times to come. For example, the outcome of the 2019 general election in India could potentially be impacted by the BJP's 'nuanced majoritarianism'. On the other hand, concerns have been flagged in Indonesia about the effect of the Ahok case on pluralism and tolerance in Indonesia.¹⁹

However, it is perhaps too early to draw a generalisation, and a more tempered analysis is required. On the whole, in the aftermath of the developments highlighted in this paper, both countries have actually witnessed a quiet passage of time, without any untoward incidents. In India, Adityanath has adopted a progressive and reform-focused stance, while in Indonesia, President Widodo has explicitly stated that hardline sentiments such as those involved in the Ahok case, will be 'clobbered'.²⁰ Furthermore, the Indian Supreme Court had in January this year outlawed 'identity politics' such as those based on religious grounds (although the feasibility of successful application of this principle is open to debate). In Indonesia too, following a recommendation by the United Nations Human Rights Council, the government has announced a review of its anti-blasphemy laws. Nonetheless, these developments can promote discussion on the possible future role and impact of religion in India and Indonesia. Taking into account the demographic scale and political importance of the regions involved (UP and Jakarta respectively), these episodes could well serve as pointers for politico-religious interactions in the future. While it may be premature to term them as indicators of a 'groundswell' of religion-based politics, they certainly deserve attention and further analysis.

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¹⁹ *CNBC*, 'Post-blasphemy ruling, Indonesia's reputation for pluralism takes a hit', Available at: <http://www.cnbc.com/2017/05/10/ahok-blasphemy-ruling-pluralism-moderate-islam-in-indonesia-takes-a-hit.html>. Accessed on 5 July 2017.

²⁰ *The Straits Times*, 'Threats to pluralism will be clobbered: Jokowi', Available at: <http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/jokowi-those-threatening-pluralism-will-be-clobbered>. Accessed 6 June 2017.