Jakarta Protest, Tied to Faith, May Have Deeper Links to Secular Politics

By JOE COCHRANE  |  NOVEMBER 13, 2016

JAKARTA — The sight of tens of thousands of Islamists marching through the Indonesian capital this month, demanding that its Christian governor be jailed for blasphemy — some even calling for his death — brought back recurrent fears of “creeping Islamization” in the world’s most populous Muslim-majority nation, where a more tolerant brand of Islam has been the norm.

But analysts here saw something different: a protest that was really about cutthroat, secular-dominated domestic politics, and an attempt to strike a blow at President Joko Widodo.

“If you look at their posters during the demonstration, there is no mention about banning alcohol, banning gay and lesbian groups, nothing like what they normally protest about,” Azyumardi Azra, a prominent Muslim scholar and former rector of the State Islamic University
in Jakarta, said of the Nov. 4 protest, which erupted in violence that left hundreds injured and one dead.

“It’s purely political, and they are using the blasphemy issue as an entry point to challenge Jokowi and pressure him,” Mr. Azra said, referring to President Joko by his popular nickname.

The direct target of the protest, the largest in Jakarta in recent years, was a political ally of the president: Gov. Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, the first Christian to run Jakarta in several decades. The Islamist groups that led the protest have seized on a reference Mr. Basuki made to the Quran in September — he lightheartedly cited a verse that warns against taking Christians and Jews as friends — and said that he should be prosecuted and jailed under Indonesia’s blasphemy laws.

Analysts like Mr. Azra believe the Islamists organized the protest at the behest of opposition parties hoping to derail Mr. Basuki’s re-election in February. They see this as an opening salvo against his backer, Mr. Joko, aimed at settling scores and ultimately denying the president re-election in 2020.

“It’s a sad development in Indonesian politics when race and religion are being used by politicians,” said Philips J. Vermonte, the head of the politics and international relations department at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Jakarta. Opponents of Mr. Basuki have also made an issue of his Chinese ancestry.

Neither Mr. Joko nor Mr. Basuki has directly accused opposition parties of being behind the Jakarta protest. But the president later said that “political actors” had taken advantage of Islamist anger to incite violence. Both opposition parties, Gerindra and the Democratic Party, denied being involved in planning the demonstration, but they have supported its goal of jailing Mr. Basuki for blasphemy and sought to link Mr. Joko to that controversy.

Both parties are fielding candidates in the Feb. 15 election, in which Mr. Joko’s governing Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle is backing Mr. Basuki.

One of the governor’s opponents is Anies Baswedan, a former minister of higher education. He is backed by Gerindra, the opposition party of Prabowo Subianto, a former general who lost the bitterly fought 2014 presidential election to Mr. Joko.

The other candidate is Agus Harimurti Yudhoyono of the Democratic Party, a former army officer and the son of Mr. Joko’s predecessor, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. Two days before the Jakarta protest, the elder Mr. Yudhoyono angrily claimed that he was being accused within government circles of masterminding it, which he called “an intelligence failure and error.”

But Mr. Yudhoyono also demanded that Mr. Basuki be prosecuted for blasphemy, suggesting that there would be violence in Jakarta if the governor was not taken to court.

After demonstrators burned vehicles and clashed with the police at the end of the protest, a senior leader of the Gerindra party, Fadli Zon, wrote on Twitter that Mr. Joko had “insulted the Muslim people and the people who were demonstrating” by allowing Mr. Basuki’s Quran reference to go unpunished.
In the aftermath of the violence, Mr. Joko canceled a state visit to Australia, an important diplomatic partner, and instead spent days meeting with leaders of prominent mainstream Islamic organizations, none of which were involved in the demonstration. Analysts saw that as an attempt to delegitimize the hard-line groups.

The United States and other Western nations have long held up Indonesia, which has more than 190 million Muslims but also influential Christian, Hindu and Buddhist minorities, as a model for religious pluralism and democracy in the region.

But the spasm of violence has raised questions about whether radical Muslims here — who have largely confined their activities to pushing for Islamic laws, persecuting religious minorities and ransacking bars that they consider affronts to Islam — are becoming pawns in Indonesia’s secular politics.

“The protest really was a picture of how radicalism is way more dangerous to Indonesia than other Muslim-majority nations,” said Yahya Cholil Staquf, the secretary general to the supreme council of Indonesia’s widely respected Nahdlatul Ulama, the world’s largest Muslim organization.

“The masses have this negative feeling toward Ahok, and all this political maneuvering has been increasing their negative emotions toward him,” he said, referring to Mr. Basuki by his nickname and describing the sentiments of protesters, most of whom were from outside Jakarta. “This makes Muslim leaders, who are in fact moderate, afraid to speak out against it, because they are afraid of the masses.”

Mr. Joko was governor of Jakarta before becoming president in 2014, and Mr. Basuki, then his deputy, inherited the position. He immediately became a political target for hard-line Muslim groups, who said a Christian should not govern the capital.
Mr. Basuki, 50, the grandson of a tin miner from Guangzhou, China, has been a popular figure here. Brash and blunt-speaking, he has continued Mr. Joko’s populist focus on quality-of-life issues and is known for publicly berating civil servants he considers incompetent or corrupt. Opinion polls indicate that he holds a large lead in the election for governor and that voters do not see ethnicity and religion as campaign issues.

The governor has repeatedly apologized for his September remarks, saying that he meant no harm. The National Police have opened a preliminary investigation into the blasphemy allegations and have questioned Mr. Basuki. But they are also questioning protest leaders on accusations that they had incited violence.

Last week, Mr. Joko promised that the investigation into Mr. Basuki would be carried out “strictly and transparently,” and said he would “not protect him” from any criminal charges. Analysts, however, said it was unlikely Mr. Basuki would face charges, given his political support as well as questions about whether he had really insulted Islam.

But they also said Mr. Joko’s attempts to mollify hard-line Islamic groups, which plan to hold another protest march on Nov. 25, underscored that religion was a potentially explosive political issue here.

Marcus Mietzner, an associate professor at Australian National University in Canberra, said it was telling that organizations in Jakarta not affiliated with hard-line Islamic elements had argued that Mr. Basuki should be held accountable for blasphemy, as have Indonesians he has met who work or study in Australia.

“For me, this shows that the racial and religious sentiment have deeply penetrated the educated middle classes,” he said.