

June 1, 2016 5:35 pm

Jakarta points the way for London mayor Sadiq Khan

Kishore Mahbubani

[Share](#) ▾[Author alerts](#)

Print

[Clip](#)

Comments

A fusion of civilisations. Is this the effect of social media, asks Kishore Mahbubani



One of Jakarta's famed traffic jams. Governor 'Ahok' is building a light rail system and a metro

The election of Sadiq Khan, a practising Muslim, as mayor of London was rightly celebrated across the world. It confirmed that openness and tolerance, hallmarks of western civilisation, are alive and well. More surprising, perhaps, is that this spirit can be found in parts of the Islamic world, too.

Indonesia is the country with the world's largest Muslim population. Its capital city, Jakarta, is run by Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, a Chinese Christian popularly known as "Ahok". This is highly significant. Why? As recently as 1998, Jakarta saw anti-Chinese riots in which more than a thousand people were killed. Mr Purnama and his family had to defend themselves with sticks, Molotov cocktails and machetes.

After 17 months as governor of Jakarta, Mr Purnama remains immensely popular. He has made some bold changes: closing down trendy but disruptive nightclubs, cleaning up red-light districts, evicting people from slums (while providing them with

better housing) and dredging clogged-up canals.

He has also demonstrated his willingness to make difficult policy choices, such as discontinuing a long-stalled monorail project in favour of a more cost-effective and efficient light rail system. Even more significantly, an underground railway, which had been held up by bureaucracy for more than 25 years, is going ahead.

Mr Purnama also believes in transparency. The entire budget of the city of Jakarta is online. Citizens can scrutinise all spending. Even his mobile phone number is public, meaning that he receives a large number of text messages, many of which he responds to personally. The city's inhabitants feel that their lives are improving.

This is why the attacks on him by hardline Islamist groups such as the Islamic Defenders Front, also known as Front Pembela Islam, are not working. In theory, appeals to religious loyalties by such groups should work against Mr Purnama. In practice, however, they have failed — suggesting that in Jakarta, as in London, a corner has been turned. The big question is why.

One reason could be greater access to information. A little-known fact about Indonesia is that its social media penetration rates are among the highest in the world. There are more than 80m users of social networks in the country. In the new climate of transparency, there is increasing evidence for Mr Purnama's claim that conditions in Jakarta are improving.

Corruption is also declining in what was a notoriously corrupt city. Video clips of Mr Purnama berating officials of the city's transport administration have gone viral. Despite the traditional Javanese preference for avoiding confrontation, he has adopted a brash, in-your-face style that has clearly angered many. He has acquired enemies.

How to succeed politically? Be prepared to die. I am ready to die

[Tweet this quote](#)

When I met him earlier this year, I asked him for his views on how to succeed politically. He replied: "Be prepared to die. I am ready to die".

His courage is obvious. And for a Chinese Christian in a largely Muslim society to have displayed such courage could have been politically suicidal. Instead, it has proved to be a vote-getter. A grass roots campaign to put him on the ballot as an independent candidate to run again as governor in 2017 has drawn wide support from the city's predominantly Islamic population. He has received more than enough nominations.

Mr Purnama's success in Jakarta is not just a local phenomenon. It demonstrates that we are moving into a new world in which people make more informed and rational decisions on the basis of greater access to information. The citizens of Jakarta are aware how backwards their city had become, even in relation to its Asian peers. So when a Chinese Christian promises that he will study best urban practices from Singapore and Taipei and bring them to Jakarta, they support him.

This is why I believe that we are witnessing globally a fusion of civilisations, not a clash of civilisations. Societies around the world are beginning to learn best urban practice from others.

The brash Chinese Christian governor of Jakarta is popular among the Islamic population of

Jakarta because he says to them, in effect: “You can see on your phones how the rest of the world has moved ahead. Follow me, and I will bring the world’s best practices to Jakarta.”

In theory, an Islamic population ought to have been reluctant to follow a Christian leader. In practice, they are embracing him. This is as significant as the election of Mr Khan.

The writer is dean and professor in the practice of public policy in the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy NUS, Singapore

RELATED TOPICS Social Media, Leadership, Urban Planning

Share Author alerts Print Clip Comments



Brexit countdown: divorce and beyond



Emerging markets rally after Brexit



Beijing in tight spot over South China Sea

Printed from: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/f510a93e-27f8-11e6-8ba3-cdd781d02d89.html>

Print a single copy of this article for personal use. Contact us if you wish to print more to distribute to others.

© THE FINANCIAL TIMES LTD 2016 FT and ‘Financial Times’ are trademarks of The Financial Times Ltd.