



Institute on Religion and Public Policy Report:

Religious Freedom in Indonesia

Executive Summary

Indonesia is the world's most populous majority Muslim country in the world and it does offer some formal protections for religious freedom. However in many regions, particularly West Java, Sulawesi, and Maluku, sectarian violence has become endemic. Although the great majority of Indonesians are fairly tolerant, militant extremists are a serious and ongoing threat to religious freedom. Also, minority groups, particularly Ahmadi Muslims, are the victims of endemic persecution, some of it state-sponsored.

Institute on Religion and Public Policy

Twice nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, the Institute on Religion and Public Policy is an international, inter-religious non-profit organization dedicated to ensuring freedom of religion as the foundation for security, stability, and democracy. The Institute works globally to promote fundamental rights and religious freedom in particular, with government policy-makers, religious leaders, business executives, academics, non-governmental organizations and others. The Institute encourages and assists in the effective and cooperative advancement of religious freedom throughout the world.

Historic and Political Framework for Religion in Indonesia

First united as the Dutch East Indies, Indonesia achieved independence in 1949 and ran its first free parliamentary elections in 1999. The country was ruled successively from 1945 to 1998 by Sukarno, father of Indonesia's independence, and Suharto, a repressive military dictator. In 1998, a coalition of religious radicals and political liberals revolted and their conflicts since then have marked the political sphere of Indonesia's multi-party parliamentary system. Indonesian society also bears the mark of the 2004 tsunami, and it is still very much a developing country.

Indonesia is the world's largest majority Muslim country, but it has significant Catholic, Protestant, Hindu, Buddhist, and other minority faiths which altogether make up less than 20% of the population. Historically Islam entered Indonesia sometime in the twelfth century and supplanted Hinduism and Buddhism. Currently the island of Bali is home to many Hindus, and small communities of ethnic Chinese on several islands practice a variety of beliefs including Buddhism

and Confucianism. Indonesia's Christian communities date to western missionaries from the 16th century to the present, and several ethnic minorities such as the Papuans and some ethnic Chinese have converted to Christianity.

Pancasila, the national ideology enshrined in the Constitution, ranks belief in one supreme God as the first of five principles. Article 28 of the constitution guarantees that citizens' "freedom of thought and conscience," and "freedom of religion" are both "human rights that cannot be limited by any circumstances." Officially, constitutional guarantees of religious freedom apply to the six religions recognized by the state, namely Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. Traditional animist beliefs are typically tolerated, but unrecognized religious groups face discrimination, as do non-believers. As article 29 explicitly notes, "The State shall be based upon the belief in the One and Only God." The Indonesian constitution gives official sanction to discrimination against non-theistic and polytheistic religious groups.

Members of unregistered minority religious groups find obtaining official recognition of births, or marriages difficult. Government officials often require them to declare that membership in one of the six recognized religions. For example Sikhs often register as Hindus. Technically, citizens may leave the religion section on their national identity card (KTP) blank, but local government officials are often unaware of that option. In practice, Indonesians have to officially belong to an official religion and various laws against blasphemy limit religious discourse. Anti-blasphemy laws provide an official excuse for harassing heterodox Islamic movements and other groups. Additionally, even the recognized minority faiths have felt the heavy hand of political interference in the form of denied building permits for churches or temples. In several instances, Islamic groups have petitioned the local government to deny permits based on objections from people who are not from the locality.

The Ahmadiyah Sect is a Muslim sect that is in the process of being formally banned in Indonesia. On June 9th 2009, a joint government edict ordered it to cease all activities which are deemed to be abnormal in terms of Islamic orthodoxy. This officially opens the formal persecution of an indigenous religious group under the state's blasphemy laws and amounts to a blatant violation of religious freedom. It is also only the latest indignity suffered by Ahmadiyah Muslims who have been subjected to various legal restrictions since the Indonesian Ulemas Council condemned them as a heretical sect in a July 2005 fatwa and increasing acts of violence. However it stops short of being an outright ban, even as it formally infringes on religious freedom, and in the past these kinds of laws have been only sporadically enforced.

Societal Discrimination

Indonesia has played host to an Islamic religious revival in recent years due to the end of repression under the former military government. Although Indonesian

Muslims are historically known for political moderation and accommodation towards indigenous Indonesian traditions, some of this revival has nurtured violent extremists. These extremists and their more literal interpretations of Islamic law have caused a disturbing number of instances where non-Muslims, or allegedly heterodox Muslims, face intimidation, arrest, or other forms of persecution for “denigrating religion,” “deviancy,” or “blasphemy.”

Christian and Muslim antagonists have generated sectarian conflicts in some parts of Sulawesi and other areas. The Indonesian government has worked to ameliorate the conflicts by killing or arresting and sentencing the instigators of violence, and there have been few incidents since 2007. However, that is not to say that attacks have stopped, but local civic and religious leaders and government officials in Sulawesi, including Vice President Josef Kalla, have worked to promote reconciliation and defuse tensions in former conflict areas. Nevertheless, violence in the Maluku continues to claim lives and destroy property.

Extremist groups like *Jemaah Islamiyah* (JI), *Mujahidin Kompak* (MK), *Tanah Runtuh*, and *Laskar Jundullah* have fermented violence against both non-Muslims and liberal or heterodox Muslim groups. Several of them continue to plot assassinations of religious leaders and bombings, but the Indonesian government has worked to dismantle their networks and capture or kill their leadership.

The province of Aceh is a major conservative bastion, and in addition to fostering separatist activity, it has also taken a leading role in making Islamic law the law of the land. Aceh instituted Shariah law in 2003, but other areas also rely on increasingly illiberal interpretations of Shariah as a major influence on legislation. Non-Muslims are subjected to these laws in the form of restrictions on their religious and secular activities, such as limits on restaurant and store hours during Ramadan or other blue laws. The anti-pornography law is a major example of how the national government has responded to this wave of increased devoutness, but so are the various laws against blasphemy.

Recent Instances of Violence or Persecution

Several new religious movements have been persecuted for blasphemy and their leaders jailed. The Sion City of Allah, the *Salamullah* or God's Kingdom of Eden sect, and the Al-Qiyadah Al-Islamiyah sect in particular stand out as recent examples. However, this issue may not be as serious a form of official discrimination as it seems when one considers the length of time these religious organizations operated in the country before being shut down and the fact that their followers have not all been jailed. This not to say that the members of these groups have not been subjected to official religious persecution, but only that there are more troubling instances of violence.

The Ahmadiyah sect has been heavily interfered with by the government, and the recent order to cease their operation will only increase the level of state-sponsored persecution. However, violent attacks on Ahmadiyah mosques, such as arson, vandalism, and forced closures occurred before the recent government order. Vicious mobs have torched houses belonging to Ahmadi Muslims, and specific instances of violence are a regular occurrence, to the point where they do not always make the papers. Western Java in particular witnessed a cluster of attacks in 2008. Not only Ahmadi Muslims, but also members of Al-Qiyadah Al-Islamiyah, and Salamullah members were targets of mob violence. The results of these pogroms are tragic: in Mataram, Lombok, East Nusa Tenggara, some 192 people are still living in a refugee center after being forced out from their village in Lingsar, West Lombok, two years ago. More than 300 houses there were destroyed.

Sectarian violence between Christian and Muslim groups may not be as virulent as it was earlier this decade, and the government has been active in reducing it. Nevertheless, it is still a serious issue for religious freedom. In Bandung, mobs have attacked several churches and their congregants, and in Central Maluku a December 9th riot was allegedly sparked last year by elementary school teacher Welhemina Holle, a Christian, who allegedly blasphemed against Islam in the presence of her sixth-graders. In Letwaru sub-district, rioters burned 73 houses to the ground, and violence forced 314 families to flee to newly set-up refugee camps.

According to the US State Department, “extremist groups used violence and intimidation to close at least 12 churches” during the 2007 reporting period, and “small churches in West Java were under the most pressure.” Nonresident hard-line religious groups caused about half of these closures, but the remainder closed due to pressure from the local community. Local governments are somewhat implicated in these closures, and while often present, police rarely acted to prevent forced church closings. In the past, they sometimes assisted militant groups in closing down churches.

Relations between Indonesia and the United States

The United States has an U.S. Embassy in Jakarta, a consulate general in Surabaya, and a consulate in Medan, and according to the State Department each of these have “regularly engaged government officials on specific religious freedom issues, and also encouraged officials from other missions to discuss the subject with the Government.” The U.S. government has active and friendly relations with Indonesia, and Secretary of State Clinton has already traveled there.

Conclusion

Indonesia is a democracy and thus responsive to public pressure. The central government provides for some religious freedom, but also is guilty of supporting religious discrimination and abuse. However, the greatest threats to religious freedom in Indonesia are the result of terrorist groups and mob violence. These threats are why Indonesia ought to remain on the watch-list, but friendly economic and political ties between the United States and Indonesia should only encourage greater cooperation in dealing with these extremists. Ultimately, the beliefs and values of the Indonesian people will decide the fate of religious tolerance and pluralism in Indonesian society. It is still shameful and disturbing that some religious movements like Ahmadiyah are the targets of both official and unofficial persecution, and hopefully the United States can encourage Indonesians to place greater emphasis on tolerance.