

## **Religious Minorities in Indonesia: Persecution and Prospects for Better Protection**

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During the past decade attacks on religious minorities have cast a shadow over Indonesia's reputation as a tolerant and religiously moderate Muslim-majority nation. Across the archipelago Christian, Buddhist, Shi'ite and Ahmadi communities, have been exposed to increasing levels of discrimination, harassment, intimidation, and violence, largely at the hands of Sunni extremists.

On May 29, 2014 seven people were injured during attacks on a Catholic prayer service in Sleman, Yogyakarta. In June a nearby church was similarly attacked by stone-throwing Sunni hardliners, claiming the church did not have a building permit. On August 7, 2013 a bomb exploded in a Buddhist temple in Jakarta, injuring three people. The following day Molotov cocktails were thrown into the yard of a Catholic high school in Jakarta.

Some of the most ferocious attacks have been directed at Indonesia's Shi'ite and Ahmadi communities. In 2011 an angry crowd in Cikeusik, Banten murdered three Ahmadi men while a local policeman looked on. In August 2012 more than 1000 Sunni villagers attacked a Shi'ite community on Madura Island off the northeast coast of Java, burning homes and killing two people. The villagers were forced to seek refuge in a local stadium where they remained in temporary shelters for 10 months. In June 2013 Sunni groups and religious leaders staged a mass protest to rid the stadium of the "blasphemers", forcing the desperate leader of the Shi'ite community to agree to a relocation of the community to a town two hours away on the island of Java.

Rising intolerance toward religious minorities in Indonesia is a product of the spread of Sunni fundamentalist ideologies as well as the increasing activism of Sunni hardliners in Indonesia's democratic politics, but intolerance and religiously motivated violence are also facilitated by state laws and regulations. Indonesia's constitution guarantees freedom of religion, but a range of other national and local laws belie the constitutional safeguard, and provide a cover for religious bullies. The primary legal enabler of abuse against religious minorities is the 1965 Presidential Decree on the Prevention of Religious Abuse and/or Defamation (1965), commonly known as the "Blasphemy Law" (Undang-Undang Penodaan Agama). The Blasphemy Law defines and criminalizes "deviant" religious practices, and remains in place despite Indonesia's ratification of the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) in 2005.

Indonesia's Ulama Council has also become increasingly active in identifying 'deviant' behavior and issuing fatwas. In January 2012 the Ulama Council of East Java declared that Shi'ism itself was blasphemous, prompting a Gubernatorial decree in July of the same year that imposed penalties on anyone who "propagates blasphemous teaching". The decree effectively legitimized the pogrom against the Shi'ite community that was carried out the following month.

The previous administration of Susilo Bambang Yudhono, who is popularly known as SBY, was routinely criticized for its failure to protect the rights and welfare of Indonesia's religious minorities. At times his government even appeared to stoke intolerant behavior. In 2006 the government established the Inter-religious Harmony Forum (*Forum Kerukunan Umat Beragama*, FKUB), a council of religious leaders whose job was to facilitate the permit process for places of worship, but mounting evidence suggests that the Forum often hindered applications for Christian church permits. More provocatively, in 2008 the government announced a ministerial decree "freezing" Amadiyah activities. SBY also appointed to parliament religious conservative ministers such as Gumawan Fauzi, the Minister for Home Affairs, who suggested relocating minorities rather than bring their intimidators to justice, and Suryadarma Ali, Minister for Religious Affairs, who publicly declared that Ahmadi and Shi'ites were heretics.

Not surprisingly, hopes are now high among religious minorities that Indonesia's new President Joko Widodo will send different signals and restore Indonesia's reputation as a tolerant and pluralistic Muslim-majority nation. "Jokowi", as the President is popularly known, has a pluralistic track record. As Governor of Jakarta he defended a Christian district head when radical Muslims attacked her credentials. He was also known for his close working relationship with his deputy Governor Basuki "Ahok" Ahmad who is Christian and of Chinese descent. Significantly, in his 2014 presidential campaign Jokowi identified "intolerance and crisis in the nation's character" as one of the three main challenges facing the nation.

Jokowi's pluralism and religious tolerance is also demonstrated through his political support base. He is backed by secular pluralist parties such as the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle and the National Democratic Party. He is also backed by the National Awakening Party, which is closely affiliated with the largest moderate Islamic organization in Indonesia—Nahdlatul Ulama. Outside of politics Jokowi is strongly supported by pluralistic Islamic scholars Quraish Shihab and Buya Syafii Maarif as well as the liberal poet Goenawan Mohamad.

Although Jokowi has yet to make any public statements on the question of religious minority rights, at the end of 2014 his newly appointed Minister for Religious Affairs Lukman Hakim Saifuddin announced plans for a new Law on the Protection of Religious Communities. This is a promising step for the protection of religious minority rights. However, unless the 1965 Blasphemy Law is rescinded, it is unclear how much impact the new law will have. Further, it remains to be seen whether Jokowi will be able to shepherd such a law through Indonesia's rambunctious Parliament. With only 37% support in the parliament, passing any legislation will be difficult for him. And there is no sign that the protection of religious minorities will be a legislative priority for the administration. The Minister's bill could languish for years. It will be even more difficult for the Jokowi administration to deal with the often discriminatory Sharia-based by-laws passed by regional governments.

If Indonesia's new President believes that "intolerance and crisis in the nation's character" is one of the biggest problems the country is facing, it is not yet clear how he plans to solve it.



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