



Indonesia – A Muslim Nation Struggles to Promote Tolerance and Pluralism

The world's fourth most populous country, Indonesia extends almost two thousand miles to encompass 13,000 islands. Of its population of 258 million, almost 80 percent identify as Muslim, but in some areas, Hindus or Christians are the majority. Indonesia's founding ideology of "Pancasila" testifies that all religions are equal and its motto is "Unity in Diversity." Most Indonesians practice a very mainstream and tolerant expression of Islam, but more militant groups have become increasingly active in recent years, attacking other Muslim sects and non-Muslims alike. Though Indonesia has made some strides in recent years to build a stronger democratic government with a viable civil society and an independent media, human rights violations continue to mar progress.

Indonesia's constitution promotes tolerance and pluralism and its laws and policies establish freedom of religion, but lack of implementation has led to discrimination against religious minorities. For example, onerous approvals are required from the surrounding community and the government before a religious minority can construct a house of worship. Even when approvals are eventually granted, extremists can mobilize to ensure that no house of worship is built. Christians have faced harassment and been prevented from entering existing churches; and churches and Hindu temples have been burned to the ground.

In other instances, the law has can embolden extremists by providing a "legal basis" for their actions. Blasphemy laws have been used to prosecute and imprison members of both traditional religions and religious minorities. Shi'a, Ahmadis, Christians, and other minorities have been attacked. One priest was stabbed to death outside of his church. There have been few repercussions against those perpetrating violence as the response of law enforcement has been perfunctory. In 2016, over half of all reported incidents of religious intolerance involved government or police forces.

The persecution of the Gafatar religious group exemplifies not only the plight that religious minorities face, but also the complicity of the government. After declaring the Gafatar sect as deviant from Islam, the government disbanded them in 2015 and charged its founders with blasphemy/treason in 2016, punishable with a life sentence. The government forcibly evicted thousands of Gafatar members from their lands and turned a blind eye as mobs burned their homes. As long as courts and law enforcement fail to protect religious minorities and prosecute violators, impunity will be a significant hindrance to religious freedom and human rights.

In January 2017, the trial began of Basuki "Ahok" Purnama, Jakarta's first Christian and ethnic Chinese governor. He is facing charges of blasphemy for allegedly misrepresenting Quranic verses during his election campaign. Despite large Muslim national organizations calling for calm, thousands of protestors urged on by Rizieq Shihab (head of the Islamic Defenders Front), clamored for Ahok to be sentenced. Indonesian Catholic students responded by filing blasphemy claims against Imam Shihab for insulting Christianity in his Christmas Day sermon. Other charges for insulting Pancasila sprang up against Shihab whose intolerance is seen as a threat to national unity. Ahok's case has been a wakeup call of the need to reform the strict blasphemy laws that date back to 1965.

In August 2016, the Indonesia-U.S. Council on Religion and Pluralism, a venture endorsed by Presidents Jokowi and Barack Obama, was launched. This independent, binational, nongovernmental body identified three priorities at its initial meeting in Indonesia: 1) increase religious understanding, mutual respect, and collaboration; 2) identify and foster positive civic and religious education models that promote analytical thinking and respect; and 3) empower civil society to deter violent extremism. In a climate of increased radicalism and discrimination against religious minorities, such a council can work to foster tolerance and pluralism that ultimately strengthens the rule of law for all Indonesians.