

INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM



USCCB Fact Sheet

Sectarian Violence and Religious Freedom in Indonesia

From a Western perspective, Indonesia is often considered the model of a moderate Muslim majority democracy. The fourth most populous country in the world with the largest number of Muslims, there are significant pockets of Christians and Hindus in various regions and provinces of Indonesia. The country's founding ideology is known as "Pancasila," meaning that all religions are equal. Indonesia's official motto is "Unity in Diversity." But although most Indonesians practice a mainstream and tolerant expression of Sunni Islam, militant groups have become increasingly active in recent years, attacking other Muslim sects and non-Muslims alike. Indonesia has made some strides to build a stronger democratic government with a viable civil society and an independent media, but human rights violations continue to mar progress.

There are fears that sectarian violence may increase and become the norm in Indonesia because religion played a key role in the May 2019 presidential campaign. President Joko Widodo, running for re-election, selected a senior Muslim cleric as his running mate to counter his main opponent, Prabowo Subianto who appealed to hardline Muslim conservatives. Despite the election commission declaring President Widodo the victor, Subianto protested and his supporters have rioted in the streets of Jakarta, resulting in hundreds being injured.

Some Muslim groups have been very vocal about radically enhancing the role of Islam in Indonesian society, leading presidential candidates to overtly display their Muslim identity to appeal to voters. This politicization of Islam has many scholars concerned that some are promoting Islamization of Indonesia. Religious freedom is at risk due to this combination of political ideology and religious ideals. One analyst noted that democracy in Indonesia is under pressure due to "the rise of a bitter form of identity politics and an increasingly intolerant approach to resolving political disputes, from the government and the opposition." In January 2019, a Catholic lay organization stated, "We firmly reject black campaigns that negatively target religion, race and ethnicity and employ the use of lies and persecution."

In May 2018, three families, led by Islamic extremists, participated in the suicide bombing of three churches in Surabaya, capital of East Java province. The first church attacked was the Immaculate Saint Mary Catholic Church; five parishioners were killed, including a child. By the end of the series of attacks, 15 had been killed and dozens of

others were injured. The families who had coordinated this sophisticated terror attack were affiliated with Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD), a Southeast Asian branch of the Islamic State. The Islamic State appeared to have ordered the attack in retaliation for the imprisonment of the JAD leader.

In the wake of this atrocity, Pope Francis prayed, "Together we invoke the God of peace so that he makes these violent actions cease." The Pope encouraged the people of Indonesia to cultivate an environment of "reconciliation and fraternity" instead of "hatred and violence." However, despite the Pope's appeal for peace, populism, corruption, and instability threaten to inhibit the development of such an environment.

Indeed, Indonesia is at a crossroads. It has the opportunity to bolster democratic institutions and sustain a multi-religious, pluralist society — or it can go down the path of intolerance. Indonesian laws have enabled the spread of intolerance as it currently stands. Blasphemy laws have been used to prosecute and imprison religious minorities. A lengthy bureaucratic process to register and open churches has hindered religious freedom, as Muslim extremists have often taken advantage of this to prevent new churches from being built.

Along with these institutional problems, the demographic and economic situation in Indonesia could exacerbate tensions. The rapid growth of the youth population, coupled with a possible lack of education or jobs in some provinces, may make them vulnerable to recruitment by extremists. Some politicians have linked rising income inequality and the growing wealth gap to complaints about privileged Chinese and Christian minorities, feeding division and sectarian sentiments. Investment is down and exports have declined, likely fueling unemployment.

Bishop Pius Riana Prapdi, President of the Youth Commission of the Bishops' Conference of Indonesia, stated that Indonesia must "recognize that radical groups operate in society, promoting intolerance with a considerable attraction for youth." The possibility of Islamization would exacerbate this problem. The promotion of religious freedom must be coupled with legitimate measures to reduce the likelihood of sectarian violence and the conditions that enable extremists to grow in number.



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