

Christians Fear Violence in Ambon May Spur Another Religious Conflict

Observers say the violence in Indonesia's South Moluccas Islands could revive the hostility that led to 9,000 deaths

Christian observers in Indonesia fear that a recent outbreak of violence in Ambon, one of the South Moluccan islands, may herald a return to the conflict that from 1999 to 2002 left more than 9,000 dead and 500,000 displaced.

On April 25, a small pro-separatism rally in Ambon city quickly turned ugly when marchers clashed with pro-unity demonstrators. The violence rapidly escalated, leaving more than 30 dead and 200 homes and other property destroyed, including two churches, a Protestant university and a United Nations office. By early May the intense fighting had subsided, replaced by terror tactics including kidnapping, torture and sniper attacks.

Sources within the government and media blame the latest violence on the small Moluccan separatist movement seeking independence from Indonesia. However, longtime observers of Indonesian affairs suspect that, like the original bloody conflict, this latest violence was caused by outside influences.

"[In] 1999, sectarian conflict was provoked in Ambon by outsiders and was used to oust President Wahid and elevate the military," said journalist Elizabeth Kendall, a longtime observer of Indonesia with the World Evangelical Alliance.

Indonesia is currently on the cusp of another presidential election. On July 5 Indonesia will elect its president by popular vote for the first time in history. Observers say the current violence in Maluku could weaken President Megawati Sukarnoputri's re-election campaign by showing her unable to maintain peace and stability.

Likewise, Kendall said the fighting seems to undermine two other contenders, presidential candidate Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and vice presidential candidate Jusuf Kalla. Both had key roles in forming the 2002 Malino Peace Accord that ended the original conflict.

Standing to gain is retired General Wiranto, who was once indicted for war crimes in East Timor and whose platform takes a hard line on security issues, Kendall noted. The Indonesian army, diminished by its loss of police powers in 1999, also benefits politically from the conflict and instability, she said.

As the violence dies down, human-rights activists fear the provocateurs may again use religion to up the ante. The original conflict, first portrayed as a tribal clash, began to fade rather quickly until it was recast as a religious conflict between Muslims and Christians.

"The issue may shift again because we know that the aim of the provocateurs is to make the Christians and Muslims fight one another like in 1999-2002," said Semmy Littik of the Maluku Shield Foundation, a Christian humanitarian organization based in Ambon. "This is a very sensitive issue given the majority of Indonesians are Muslims. So the issue may shift [from separatism] to religious solidarity, which justifies outsiders fighting in Maluku."

When it was characterized as a religious battle, the 1999 conflict increased exponentially as Muslim and Christian militias from abroad, including terrorist groups such as the Laskar Jihad, began infiltrating Maluku. Though the current violence has been condemned by both faiths, area Christians are concerned about rumors of the Laskar Jihad's return. Though the separatists identify themselves as Christians, the broader Christian community rejects the association. Still, Christians in the region already are being targeted by the provocateurs.

"Prayer succeeded where police power failed," said Charles Cole, a Southern Baptist representative working in Indonesia. On April 30, Cole sent an urgent update reporting that the Laskar Jihad had allegedly landed in Ambon and were marching on Kuda Mati, a predominantly Christian area, when a sudden, heavy rain dispersed the attackers.

Thirty homes were burned, Cole reported, but the church at the bottom of Kuda Mati Hill was saved, thanks to a vigorous defense by the church youth. He said security forces had withdrawn rather than face the large mob.

In May two units of the BRIMOB, or police Mobile Brigade, and two army battalions were dispatched to Ambon, nearly tripling the number of security personnel previously on hand.

But the presence of the army and the BRIMOB is little comfort to some. Father Cornelius Bohm, a priest at the Crisis Centre Diocese of Ambonia, said many Christians witnessed the recent destruction of the Nazareth Church at the hand of the military, not the mobs, and are calling for the withdrawal of outside forces.

Littik said neither the local Muslim nor Christian communities are involved in the recent violence. "In certain villages, Muslims are looking after Christians' houses and visa versa," he said. Absent outside interference, Littik claims, the current violence would never have taken place, as the local citizens "are not interested in this bloody political game. They are merely victims of the political games of the elites."

David Mundy