

Indonesian Muslims Call for Halt to 'Christianization'

Muslim organizations in Bekasi, West Java, last week declared their intention to establish paramilitary units in local mosques and a "mission center" to oppose "ongoing attempts to convert people to Christianity," according to the national Antara news agency.

At a gathering at the large Al Azhar mosque June 27, the leaders of nine organizations announced the results of a Bekasi Islamic Congress meeting on June 20, where they agreed to establish a mission center to halt "Christianization," form a Laskar Pemuda youth army and push for implementation of sharia (Islamic law) in the region, *The Jakarta Post* reported.

"If the Muslims in the city can unite, there will be no more story about us being openly insulted by other religions," Ahmad Salimin Dani, head of the Bekasi Islamic Missionary Council, announced at the gathering. "The center will ensure that Christians do not act out of order."

Observing an increasing number of house churches, Muslim organizations have accused Bekasi Christians of aggressive proselytizing. The Rev. Simon Timorason of the West Java Christian Communication Forum (FKKB), however, told Compass that most Christians in the area do not proselytize and meet only in small home fellowships due to the lack of officially recognized worship venues.

Many Christian seminary graduates prefer to remain on Java rather than relocate to distant islands, Timorason added, making West Java the ideal place to launch new home-based fellowships for different denominations. But neighbors see only the multiplication of churches, he said, and therefore suspect Muslims are converting to the Christian faith.

“The ideal solution is to have one building with a permit to be used by different denominations in each housing complex,” Timorason said. “If every denomination wants their own church in the same area, it’s a problem.”

Declaration of Intent

Kanti Prajogo, chairman of the Congress committee, had hoped to present a written declaration of intent to city officials at the mosque gathering, but officials did not respond to his invitation, according to *The Jakarta Post*.

Around 200 people attended the June 20 Congress, representing local organizations such as the Bekasi Interfaith Dialogue Forum, the Bekasi Movement Against Apostasy, the local chapters of Muhammadiyah and the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI)—two of Indonesia’s largest Muslim organizations—and the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), well known for its aggressive opposition to Christians and other non-Muslim groups.

Government officials on June 28 called for the FPI to be declared a forbidden organization, claiming that FPI members were implicated in “too many” violent incidents.

“We are not concerned about their mission,” legislator Eva Kusuma Sundari reportedly said at a press conference in Jakarta, “but we are concerned about the way they implement their goals.”

A spokesman for another large organization, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), said July 28 that despite one member being present at the congress in an unofficial capacity, NU had not approved the joint declaration, contradicting a statement made the previous day by Bekasi NU official Abul Mutholib Jaelani, who told *The Jakarta Post* that he had asked all 56 NU branches in the city to contribute at least 10 members to the youth army.

Contributing to Religious Conflict

Rapid residential and industrial development has created huge social problems in Bekasi. Sociologist Andi Sopandi of Bekasi Islamic University told *The Jakarta Post* that the call for sharia was a warning signal, and that local officials should urgently pursue dialogue between Muslim and Christian leaders.

Locals and newcomers will get along well only if they share similar basic values, particularly religious ones, Sopandi reportedly said, pointing to sharp disputes over the Filadelfia Huria Kristen Batak Protestan (HKBP) church in Jejalen Jaya sub-district earlier this year as an example.

A neighbor of the church confessed to *The Jakarta Post* that local clerics had asked him and other residents to sign a petition against constructing the HKBP church building and threatened not to pray at their funerals if they failed to cooperate; the majority of his neighbors signed the document under duress.

Under a 2006 Joint Ministerial Decree (SKB), at least 60 local residents must approve the establishment of a house of worship, whether a mosque or a church. The congregation must also have at least 90 members and obtain letters of recommendation from the local interfaith communication forum (FKUB) and religious affairs office before gaining final approval from district officials.

These terms make it virtually impossible for churches in Bekasi to obtain building permits. Bekasi regency has a population of 1.9 million, of which 98.2 percent are Muslim, according to 2006 data from the Bekasi Regency Religious Affairs office. Protestants, who form percent of the population (approximately 12,700 people), and Catholics who make up percent, are served by only 16 officially recognized churches in seven of the 23 sub-districts.

Sudarno Soemodimedjo, deputy chief of the Bekasi FKUB, told

The Jakarta Post in February that even if a church construction committee gained the approval of 60 local residents, the FKUB would not issue a letter of recommendation if there were any public objections.

"The SKB orders us to maintain public order, which means we have to refuse the establishment of a house of worship we believe may trigger a conflict in the future," he said.

As a result, many Christians meet in unrecognized worship venues, giving Muslim groups legal grounds to oppose church gatherings. "If the SKB was applied consistently, many mosques that were built without permits would have to close," Timorason told *Compass*.

The government wants each new settlement to have a place of worship, he added, "but it's always a mosque. There should be one of each to be fair."

"Violations against freedom of religion remain rampant [in Indonesia]," confirmed the chairman of the Setara Institute for Democracy and Peace, who goes by the single name of Hendar di, at a press conference announcing the release of its January 2010 "Report on the Condition of Religious and Faith Freedom in Indonesia."

"This is mostly because the government is half-hearted in its upholding of the right to worship," he said.

Of 139 violations recorded by the institute last year, West Java took first place with 57 incidents, followed closely by Jakarta at 38.