

Move to Halt Church Worship Results in Public Apology

A state civil servant's angry halt to her Christian neighbor's home worship on Sunday (Sept. 22) near Jakarta, Indonesia, led to an uproar that resulted in her apologizing, according to local media.

The head of the Tourism Marketing Unit at the Bekasi Municipal Tourism Office, identified as Masriwati, stopped the worship service at the Christian's house at Perumahan Nasional 2, Jalan Siput Raya No. 102, South Bekasi, Bekasi, about 17 miles outside of Jakarta.

"You have no permit [to hold worship]," she shouted at worshippers, according to a video of the incident that appeared on X and other social media. The video shows a man at times restraining her from going nearer to the Christians.

When a church member told her they had a right to worship, Masriwati, clad in a yellow hijab, responded, "Yes, but it is not the place to worship. A place of worship must have a permit. A place of residence does not have a permit to hold worship," the video shows.

A neighbor is seen saying that that praying (worshipping) does not require permission and called Masriwati's actions a form of intolerance. Several residents are seen in the video trying to calm the situation and restrain Masriwati.

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After objections to the religious freedom violation grew on social and mainstream media, Masriwati's supervisor helped mediate the dispute, resulting in Masriwati apologizing at a press conference in the presence of the parties and the

caretaker mayor of Bekasi, Raden Gani Muhamad, reported.

“On behalf of myself and my family, on this occasion I would like to apologize for my actions and statements,” Masriwati said. “To the Bekasi city government, the people of Bekasi and especially the people in my neighborhood, to the pastor and her congregation, for my unpleasant actions and statements to be forgiven.”

The church’s female pastor, who goes by the single name Maria, accepted her apology, and the agreement called for the church to worship at another location.

“As a pastor, I also accept Mrs. Sri’s [shortened form of Masriwati] apology, we forgive you,” Pastor Maria said. “On this occasion, I would like to thank the mayor, the commander of the military district, the chief of police for apologizing, and all parties I can’t mention one by one. I am grateful that this could happen, and once again we forgive you.”

The mayor stated that the problem between the two parties had been resolved, and that each side forgave the other.

The parties agreed that the congregation would worship at another location – a church building at Perumnas 2, Kayuringin Jaya, South Bekasi – as facilitated by the Bekasi city government and the Interreligious Harmony Forum (Forum Kerjasama Umat Beragama, or FKUB) and the South Bekasi Sub-District, according to .

Among those who had objected to Masriwati’s interference on social media was Herry Tjahjono, who posted on Facebook that the case was just one of many in Indonesia.

“And we know that the incident in Bekasi was just the tip of the iceberg of various intolerance actions representing many ‘broken home families’ in various [parts] of this country,” Herry said. “It is the face of our country. It is unpleasant to see it.”

Also voicing objections were religious freedom activists, government officials and writers. Account X @nimas31 wrote on X, "The worship was carried out and did not disturb her or other residents at all. The Christian congregation prayed solemnly in one of the congregation's houses without even using a loudspeaker."

Account X @nimas31, wrote, according to VIVA. Com., "There is a mother who is angry with people praying in their homes?! Using no noisy loudspeaker, and blocking no roads for the worship, where is the justification for prohibiting rights and freedoms guaranteed by the constitution? This woman is a civil servant, at least she should be aware of regulations, if she's intolerant, fire her."

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Indonesia's Joint Ministerial Decree of 2006 requires a permit only for worship venues used on a permanent basis, "excluding family places of worship," rights activists say.

"According to The Joint Decree of the Two Ministers, Chapter 1, Article 3, what needs a permit is the construction of a church," rights activist Permadi Arya, known as Abu Janda, wrote in 2023. "Holding worship at home, shop-houses and cafes needs no permission."

Such homes, cafés and shop-houses can be equated with Muslim traditional prayer-rooms (musholla), and since Muslims need no permission for those, Christians should receive equal treatment, he said.

Islamic extremists have been largely responsible for using lack of building permits as a pretext for closing or attacking churches since the passage of Indonesia's Joint Ministerial Decree of 2006, which made requirements for obtaining such permits nearly impossible for most new churches.

Even when small, new churches were able to meet the requirement of obtaining 90 signatures of approval from congregation members and 60 from area households of different religions, they have often met with delays or lack of response from officials.

Muslims account for 83.3 percent of Indonesia's population, while percent identify as Christian, with the evangelical population estimated at percent, according to the Joshua Project.

Indonesia ranked 42nd on Christian support organization Open Doors' 2024 World Watch List of the 50 countries where it is most difficult to be a Christian. Indonesian society has adopted a more conservative Islamic character, and churches involved in evangelistic outreach are at risk of being targeted by Islamic extremist groups, according to the WWL report.

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