

Indonesia Mayor Rejects Church Permit

✖ A mayor in West Java who disregarded a Supreme Court ruling to reinstate the building permit of a church in Bogor has now dismissed a recommendation by the National Ombudsman Institute to do so.

Bogor Mayor Diani Budiarto rejected the recommendation to reinstate the permit for the Indonesian Christian Church (Gereja Kristen Indonesia, or GKI) Yasmin Bogor Church last month, leaving the congregation to worship on a small strip of land as 15 to 20 Muslim demonstrators taunt them.

“The Ombudsman’s recommendation is only a suggestion,” the mayor told *Tempo* magazine.

Church spokesman Bona Sigalingging said at a press conference in July that 15 people who claimed that they were from the neighborhood near the church site disrupted services on July 3 and 10.

“They demonstrated and insisted that the church stop services that were already underway,” Sigalingging said.

He said the mayor sent two letters to the church, one in May and one on July 9, urging the congregation to cease services on the roadside strip.

In the letter he claimed that the church created a general annoyance and suggested they worship at the Harmony Building some 500 meters from the sealed GKI Yasmin Church building.

The congregation paid no heed to the letter, Sigalingging said, because the church's worship on the roadside is a result of the mayor's own doing.

"We worship in the roadside strip because the mayor has locked and sealed our church, which is against the Supreme Court decision," he said. "If Budiarto had not locked and sealed our church, we would certainly not worship by the roadside."

Sigalingging said holding services at the Harmony Building is not an appropriate solution because it was not designed for worship, even though church members do not like worshipping on the roadside in the torrid heat and unexpected rain showers.

Sigalingging acknowledged that the congregation had used the Harmony Building in early January for worship, a temporary arrangement the mayor had offered while awaiting a final decision from the Supreme Court.

"And the mayor promised that he would abide by whatever decision was handed down by the Supreme Court," he said.

Rather than complying with the Supreme Court decision, he said, the mayor made revocation of the GKI building permit permanent.

“Based on this experience, we no longer believe the mayor,” he said.

In addition, Sigalingging said, on March 7 the Bogor City government verbally offered the church relocation to one of four locations.

“We did not respond to this offer, because relocation is not the solution,” he said.

The Supreme Court decision was final, he said, and the mayor should have complied instead of “trying to bargain.”

He cited the experience of another church in West Java, the Batak Christian Protestant Church (Huria Kristen Batak Protestan, or HKBP) in Ciketing, Bekasi, which has been promised a building permit but has received nothing. The church is still meeting in a community organization building, and the Bekasi City government has declined to issue a building permit.

“Referring to the law that exists, we reject the offer of relocation,” Sigalingging said.

The GKI Yasmin Bogor congregation is determined to continue worshipping on the roadside if the government refuses to open the seal on the church.

“As long as the mayor refuses to take off the seal, we are going to

continue worshipping on the roadside,” he said.

The vice president of the Setara Institute for Democracy and Peace, Bonar Tigor Naipospos, said that there is suspicion that the Bogor City government intends to prevent the existence of the GKI Yasmin church by all possible means.

The demonstrators against the church give reasons that are artificial and senseless, Naipospos said.

“Why are they demonstrating now, and not two years ago, when the church was in the planning stages?” he said.

Budiarto has staged an attack because he has clearly broken the law, he added.

“The decision of the Supreme Court is final; why did he revoke the GKI Yasmin building permit?” he said. “Similar problems are going to arise, if this is left [unresolved].”

Naipospos speculated that if the problem remains unaddressed, other conflicts could appear.

“This is very dangerous, and I worry that if this problem languishes there will be incidents such as occurred at Ciketing [where a church elder was stabbed], or at Cikeusik [where three members of the Ahmadiyah sect were beaten to death by a mob],” he said.