

Anti-Christian Incidents Nearly Doubled in Indonesia in 2011

Acts of violence and **intolerance against Christians** in Indonesia almost doubled in 2011, with an **Islamist campaign** to close down churches symbolizing the plight of the **religious minority**.

The Indonesian Protestant Church Union, locally known as PGI, counted 54 acts of violence and other violations against Christians in 2011, up from 30 in 2010.

The number of such incidents against religious minorities in general also grew, from 198 in 2010 to 276 in 2011, but the worst is perhaps yet to come if authorities continue to overlook the **threat of extremism**, said a representative from the Jakarta-based **Wahid Institute**, a Muslim organization that promotes tolerance.

Rumadi, who goes by a single name, said his Wahid Institute also observed an attempt to institutionalize intolerance in this archipelago of about 238 million people, of whom about 88 percent Muslim. At least 36 regulations to ban religious practices deemed deviant from Islam were drafted or implemented in the country in 2011.

A Jakarta-based civil rights group, the Setara Institute for Democracy and Peace, noted that both the government and groups in society were responsible for the incidents, with the main violators including religious extremist organizations such as the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI).

Indonesia's hot-bed of extremism is West Java, the most populous province that includes the nation's capital city of Jakarta. This province alone witnessed 160 incidents against

religious minorities. In the 1950s, West Java was the base of an Islamist group, Darul Islam, whose splinter groups are still active, fighting the “secular” government and religious minorities.

Church Closures

Churches in West Java, which has about 520,000 Christians, also suffered the most last year. On Christmas Day, two churches in West Java’s Bogor city bore the brunt of growing extremism.

“**Islamist vigilantes** screamed and yelled at us and threatened us, as we sought to hold a Christmas service,” a leader of the Gereja Kristen Indonesia, also known as the GKI or the Yasmin Church, told Compass in an email.

“We could not hold Christmas service in our own church for a second year,” said the source, who requested anonymity.

The city administration, allegedly under pressure from local extremist groups, sealed off the half-constructed building of the church, situated in the Taman Yasmin housing complex on a street named H. Abdullah Bin Nuh, in 2010. Before Christmas that year, the Supreme Court ordered the city mayor, Diani Budiarto, to unseal the church building, and later an ombudsman also recommended the same, but the official refused to oblige. The church has held worship services on a sidewalk, with police cordoning off the compound, since April 2010.

On Dec. 25, church members insisted they wanted to celebrate Christmas in the building, which is legally theirs, but police prevented them from even going near the structure, the source said. The congregation met in a church member’s home.

Showing solidarity with the church were members of Ansor, youth wing of one of Indonesia’s largest Muslim organizations, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU); interfaith activists, including the sister and youngest daughter of former president Abdurrahman Wahid; and members of the Asian Muslim Action Network. But

they could do little to help.

“The police first allowed the vigilantes to stand next to us, and then moved them just about three meters away,” the church leader said. “The vigilantes issued threats to us, but the police did not arrest them.”

Having overseen the sealing of the Yasmin church, Muslim extremists are now targeting a 2,000-member Catholic church in Bogor city’s Parung area. The Santo Joannes Baptista (St. John the Baptist) church was able to hold its mass on Christmas Eve, followed by a Christmas Day service, although authorities had formally ordered the church to stop all activities.

The church building was constructed six years ago, but days before Christmas the head of Bogor district, Rachmat Yasin, issued the cessation order arguing that its construction violated planning rules due to its proximity to a residential area. Soon after the order, a group called the Muslim Community of Parung Bogor placed a banner near the church, stating that it was in support of Rachmat’s move to ban church activities, according to *The Jakarta Globe*.

“The site is not for a church, but it was a house turned into a house of worship. It is a violation,” Rachmat told the daily. “Moreover, they worship on a regular basis. It is a mistake.”

The head of the Indonesian Bishops Conference, Benny Susetyo, said there had been no conflict between the church and the people living in its vicinity for six years.

“The problem arose when a group of people started to disturb the calm in the region around the house of worship,” he told *The Jakarta Globe*.

Susetyo added that district authorities had repeatedly rejected demands made by the church for a permit, without giving any reason.

“This is despite us having clearly followed the procedure for the construction of houses of worship.”

Islamist groups have demanded a similar action against five other churches in Pracimantoro town in Central Java province, the source added. These churches – Pentecostal Church of Indonesia in the Ngalu Wetan area, Church of all Nations and Bethel Tabernacle Church in the Gebangharjo area, Javanese Christian Church in the Godang area, and Nazarene Christian Church in the Lebak area – have operational permits to hold church services. They had applied for building permits, but authorities never responded.

Central Java is also a hub of **Islamist extremists**. Last Sept. 25, a suicide bomber said to be an Islamist terrorist blew himself up at the gate of the Sepenuh Injil Bethel Church (Bethel Full Gospel Church) in Solo city, injuring about 20 people.

Sealing of church buildings and the refusal to grant building permits top the list of major violations of Christians' religious rights in Indonesia, according to the Setara Institute. A 2006 joint ministerial decree requires signatures from congregations and residents living nearby, as well as approval from the local administration, to build a house of worship.

Government Inaction

The Setara Institute criticized President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono for inaction. The president urged people to be tolerant in at least 19 of his speeches in 2011, but he has not backed his words with action, it noted in a recent report.

Intolerance has steadily been increasing in Indonesia, whose constitution is based on the doctrine of Pancasila – five principles upholding the nation's belief in the one and only God and social justice, humanity, unity and democracy for all.

The Setara report cited a February incident in which a mob of

about 1,500 Muslim extremists brutally killed three members of the Ahmadiyya community, which is seen as heretical by mainstream Muslims, in the province of Banten near West Java.

“Cases of intolerance have intensified this year, numbering more than last year, and at the core of the problem is poor law enforcement by the government,” Setara deputy chairman Bonar Tigor Naipospos told *The Jakarta Globe*.