

Attacks on Indonesian Churches Spiked in 2010, Group Says

Violations of Christians' religious freedom in Indonesia jumped from 12 incidents in 2009 to 75 last year, according to a report from the Setara Institute for Democracy and Peace.

Setara Institute researcher Ismail Hasani said at a press conference last week that 43 incidents involved attacks on churches and other security threats, sealing of worship venues and prohibition of activities, among other violations. Other incidents among the 75 violations included blocking churches from establishing places of worship and banning services and other religious activities.

Those involved in the violations acted primarily as members of community organizations, Hasani said.

"Most violations were committed by community groups—70 incidents by groups such as the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), which was responsible for 17 incidents, the Islamic People's Forum (FUI), which committed 11, and the Islamic Reform Movement (GARIS) which committed 10," Hasani said. "Individuals were responsible for five incidents, and the Communication Forum for Religious Harmony (FKUB) committed three."

In previous years most religious freedom violations overall have occurred in West Java Province, and that trend continued as Setara recorded 91 incidents against Christians and other groups in 2010.

"West Java, besides having a history of radicalism, is a region that also has thriving hard-line Islamist organizations that have special agendas such as enforcement of sharia

[Islamic law] and eradication of immorality, besides being anti-Christianization and anti-proselytizing,” Hasani said.

After the 75 violations committed against Christian groups, the minority Muslim Ahmadiyya sect endured the next highest number of violations with 50, he said.

Theophilus Bela, secretary general of the Indonesian Committee on Religion and Peace and president of the Jakarta Christian Communication Forum, reported 46 incidents of religious freedom violations churches suffered in 2010.

The violations included destruction of church buildings.

“The Huria Kristen Batak Protestan or Batak Protestant Christian Church in Sibuhun, Tapanuli Selatan, North Sumatra Province, was burned down by fanatical Muslims on Jan. 22, 2010 after their Friday prayer in a nearby mosque,” Bela stated in a year-end report. “The house of the pastor was also burned down.”

On the same day, he reported, the Pentecostal Church in Indonesia (Gereja Pantekosta di Indonesia) in Sibuhun, Tapanuli Selatan, North Sumatra Province was also burned down by Muslim extremists.

Besides the 46 incidents, Bela said there were other violations that were not yet fully documented.

Government Failure

West Java officials have shown hardly any resolve to protect freedom of religion and belief, Setara’s Hasani said.

West Java Gov. Ahmad Herryawan of the Islamist-based Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) has chosen to remain silent, he said.

“Besides not having a clear vision about freedom of religion and belief, Herryawan is also held hostage by his party’s policies, which tend to be intolerant,” Hasani said.

Intolerance toward religious minorities intensified last year, with hard-line Islamist organizations often resorting to vigilantism and violence, according to the Setara Institute.

"The dominant actors who committed violence are vigilante groups," said Hasani.

The Setara report also points to high involvement of police and local government officials, as well as a failure of policemen to control Islamist groups.

"Regional leaders submitted to the pressures of the [Islamic] majority, although they [Islamists] were breaking the law and the constitution," Hasani said. "Omissions were committed by the police by letting citizens have their religious freedom threatened, and by not taking legal action against the groups who committed violence." He added that there were exceptions, with some violators being prosecuted.

Local governments used religious issues for political purposes, either to gather political support or to subdue opponents, he added.

"Politicization of [religious] identity happened in nearly all levels of government," he said.

Minister of Religious Affairs Suryadharma Ali failed to protect religious freedom and belief, he said. Ali, of the Islamist party called the United Development Party (PPP), has denied that incidents of violence in 2010 were religiously motivated. At the same time, he said on Jan. 10 that the main cause of religious tensions was that some groups did not want to meet the legal requirements for establishing houses of worship.

The Joint Ministerial Decree promulgated in 1969 and revised in 2006 requires places of worship to obtain the approval of at least 60 persons from the local community, mandates that there be at least 90 church members and that the church must

be approved by the the village head. These requirements are difficult for smaller churches to meet, and local governments routinely stall the paperwork of those that do apply, thus exposing them to accusations of illegality from Islamist groups.

Besides the minister of Religious Affairs, the ministers of Internal Affairs, Justice and Human Rights, and Indonesia's president were unsupportive of freedom of religion, Hasani said. President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono is closing his eyes to various violations of religious freedom, he said.

Yudhoyono proudly said on Jan. 21 that during his administration no serious human rights abuses that have occurred, Hasani said.

"On the contrary, during his leadership, there has been violation of fundamental rights to freedom of religion and belief," he said. "There have been no initiatives or meaningful breakthroughs in overcoming the various abuses faced by the Christian church."

Bonar Tigor Naipospos, vice chairman of the Setara Institute, said that there was some progress in religious freedom in Indonesia. An administrative court in Bandung rescinded an order to revoke the building permit of the Batak Christian Protestant Church (Huria Kristen Batak Protestan, or HKBP)—a reversal that was upheld by the Supreme Court.

"The Setara Institute also appreciated steps that have been taken by police in the attack on the HKBP church in Ciketing, Bekasi," Naipospos said, referring to a Sept. 12 assault in which an elder was seriously wounded and a pastor injured. "They are legally processing the perpetrators of stabbing."

In the face of government denial of problems, however, the chairman of the Setara Institute, Hendar di, demanded that Indonesian leaders immediately draw up a law assuring freedom of religion. Hendar di, who goes by a single name, also said

that President Yudhoyono should replace the minister of Religious Affairs and disregard political party wishes in replacing him.

Police should formulate internal policies conducive to the promotion of freedom of religion and design training for police officers on how to resolve religious conflict, he added.