

Christians Most Hit by Religious Freedom Violations in Indonesia

Mob succeeds in getting local official to shut down HKBP church in West Java.

✖ A moderate Muslim research institute focusing on interfaith issues in Indonesia reported 35 cases of government violations of religious freedom – including 28 against Christians – and 93 instances of community intolerance of churches in 2009.

(Photo is not of HKBP church in West Java)

The Wahid Institute issued a year-end report of violations that included the revocation of the building permit for the HKBP Cinere Church – later overturned in court – opposition to a Catholic Church in Purwakarta and an order forbidding worship by the Filadelfia Huria Kristen Batak Protestant Church (HKBP) in Bekasi, West Java.

The highest number of violations occurred in West Java, with 10 cases, including seven against Christians; next was East Java with eight, including four against Christians, followed by Jakarta Province with four (three against Christians). In Central Java, two of three religious violation cases were against Christians, and in West Nusa Tenggara, one of the three violations violated Christians' rights.

Government infractions included closing churches and failing to intervene in mob actions. Police were cited in 18 cases, provincial governments in eight, village and sub-district governments in six cases each and courts in two incidents.

Just as government violations were highest in West Java,

community intolerance there was also highest with 32 cases, of which 14 were against Christians. Next was Jakarta, where eight of 15 cases of community intolerance were against Christians, then East Java where six of 14 cases hurt Christians. In Central Java, Christians were the victims in five of the 13 cases of community intolerance.

In West Java, the root problem is the spread of hatred against religious groups, including Christians and Jews, according to the report.

While the reported violations of religious freedom were lower than in 2008, the issue of religious intolerance continued to grow during 2009, aided by legislative and presidential elections as religion is often used to gain votes in Indonesian elections, according to the study. The overall figure of 128 cases of violations of religious freedom by government or society in 2009 represents a drop from the 2008 figure of 234 cases, according to the Wahid Institute.

Yenny Zanuba Wahid, director of the institute, told Compass that the government has not considered freedom of religion an important issue that needed attention. As a result, the government has not addressed reports of intolerance even in the face of international pressure.

"The government has been timid to acknowledge violations of religious freedom, but these are real and are carried out directly by government bodies or indirectly as a result [of government] policies," Wahid said.

Muslims make up 88.2 percent of Indonesia's population of about 240 million people, with Protestant Christians making up 5.9 percent, Catholics 3.1 percent, Hindus 0.8 percent, Buddhists 0.2 percent, and other religions 0.2 percent.

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Church Closure

In West Java, mob efforts to shut down the Filadelfia Huria Kristen Batak Protestan Church (HKBP) in Bekasi succeeded on Dec. 31 when the district officer issued a decree ordering a stop to all worship activities at the site of the church building under construction.

The decree ordered that the construction of the building stop, and that the structure not be used for worship until the building permit process was final. The district officer based his recommendation upon a 1990 rule regarding building permits in Bekasi.

Tigor Tambubolon, head of the church building committee, acknowledged that the building permit had not been formally granted even though the process had been under way since 2000.

"We already have the permission of the Jejalen citizens," Tambubolon told Compass. "That's why we were brave enough to hold Christmas Eve services."

Last Christmas Eve hundreds of protestors demanding a halt to worship demonstrated against services at the site, where 279 Christians had gathered.

A New Year's service scheduled to take place at the site moved to the office of the village head due to fears that protestors would become unruly. Police Chief Herry Wibowo said his officers guarded the church site at that time.

The Rev. Palti Panjaitan of Filadelfia HKBP told Compass that the church had been worshipping in the area since 2000 by meeting at various members' homes. As the congregation grew, they rented a building combining a home and store in Vila Bekasi 2 Tambun.

"The local citizens demonstrated against our worship services," said Panjaitan. "From there we moved to a member's home in Jejalan village. We profited because the Jejalan citizens were very good."

Eventually the church bought a piece of land there. A number of the community leaders and the village head gave their agreement to build the Filadelfia HKBP church there.

The Interfaith Harmony Forum of Bekasi district gave approval for the building with the stipulation that the church obey a joint ministerial decree revised in 2006 regarding construction of houses of worship. The building committee obtained signatures of 259 non-Christians endorsing the project, though the joint decree required only 60 signatures. Then the building committee wrote a formal request for a building permit.

Church elder Tambubolon, however, added that a sub-district officer collected signatures from citizens opposed to the construction of a house of worship in Jejalan. The total number of signatures is unknown, but the sub-district office sent a letter to the district officer rejecting the building permit.

Nevertheless, Tambubolon said, the church is not considering a lawsuit over the district officer's decree.

"We are going to continue worshipping, because it is the right of every citizen," he said. "If we are forbidden to worship even in the village office, we will continue to do so."