

Indonesian Islamists Bully Villagers Into Revoking Church Permit

✖ The regent of Purwakarta regency, West Java, has revoked his decision to permit construction of a Catholic worship building in Cinanka village after Islamists threatened residents into withdrawing their approval of the project.

Dedi Mulyadi on Oct. 16 revoked the permit for construction of Catholic Church of Saint Mary after Islamists threatened some of the local residents whose approval is required by Indonesian law, the priest of the church told Compass Direct News.

“Those who had signed were continually terrorized by the FPI [Front Pembela Islam, or Islamic Defenders Front],” the Rev. Agustinus Made said. “They became so frightened that when they were called to a meeting by the Interfaith Communications Forum, many did not attend. Also, the members of the Interfaith Communications Forum and the Department of Religion were also terrorized by the FPI so that they were afraid to say that they agree to the church building.”

The FPI also intimidated the regent, resulting in his revoking the building permit he himself had signed two years ago, Made said.

“Since the end of the Islamic month of fasting [Aug. 22], the FPI has staged repeated demonstrations in front of the regent’s office demanding that the building permit for Santa Maria Church be rescinded,” he added.

The 5,000-square meter residential lot had been zoned for a house of worship. Jaenal Arifin, head of the National Unity and Community Protection Purwakarta Regency Office, said

Regent Mulyadi signed the Oct. 16 decree revoking the building permit.

A Joint Ministerial Decree promulgated in 1969 and revised in 2006 requires the permission of more than 60 neighbors and a permit from local authorities to establish a place of worship. The more than 60 local citizens giving their approval must provide photocopies of their identity cards.

The regency office's Arifin said that, after a review of a community survey taken by the Interfaith Communications Forum of Purwakarta Regency and the Purwakarta Regency Department of Religion, 15 citizens had withdrawn their support. Additionally, he said, the church had not secured permission from the block captain.

"Based upon the latest developments, only 45 citizens have agreed," Arifin said "Therefore the requirement is not fulfilled."

The congregation of 1,000 people has been holding services in a warehouse belonging to a steel factory located far from the proposed building site. The church has been worshipping in the warehouse since 2002.

With the revocation of the building permit, the church is also in danger of losing its place of worship. There is fear, Made said, that a radical group will approach the owner of the warehouse to stop services there.

The church is preparing to bring a lawsuit in a West Java court, he said.

"We are building on land that was set aside [zoned] for a house of worship, and which we have purchased," Made said. "We demand that justice be firmly enforced. Intimidation by radical groups must cease."