

Indonesian President Sidesteps Church Controversy

In a defeat for the rule of law in Indonesia, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono has declined to enforce a Supreme Court ruling that a local government allow a West Java church to **worship** in its building.

The Bogor city government revoked the building permit of the Christian Church of Indonesia (Gereja Kristen Indonesia, or GKI) Yasmin church in February 2008. The Supreme Court ordered it be reinstated in December 2010, but Bogor Mayor Dhani Budiarto has refused.

President Yudhoyono said on Feb. 13 that he would hand the matter back to the Bogor municipal government and the Ministry of Religion.

"I have turned over [the issue] to the Bogor city government assisted by the minister of Religion, so that worship may be held at the church just as other faiths in this country do," he said at a televised press conference.

Yudhoyono later told reporters that such matters should be handled by local administrations in accordance with the Indonesia's regional autonomy law, according to *The Jakarta Post*.

The president's statement constitutes "a false argument to give legitimacy to his decision for not getting involved in the dispute," lawmaker Eva Kusuma Sundari of the Indonesian Democratic Party told the *Post*.

At the press conference, Yudhoyono said he hoped the problem could be settled in a manner that satisfies all parties, and that the government is serious in implementing the 1945 Constitution, which states that every citizen should be able

to worship in a peaceful orderly manner.

Other such cases have arisen since 2002, he said, adding that he hoped the respective mayors, regents and governors could resolve them.

“I want Christians to be able to **worship** in this country,” he said.

Yudhoyono said he hoped that an extra-legal solution—presumably some kind of local agreement, even though the parties in dispute are at an impasse—would lead to quick implementation of the Supreme Court decision to reinstate the GKI Yasmin church permit.

Worship at National Palace

The GKI congregation, along with sympathizers from other **religious faiths**, has held worship services three times in front of the National Palace.

Now forbidden to worship even on the roadside strip in front of the building that Bogor municipal government has sealed, the congregation gathered at 1 p.m. on Feb. 12, enthusiastic but hot under umbrellas. The service lasted 30 minutes and was led by the Rev. Ujang Tanusaputra.

Church lawyer Jayadi Damanik said afterward that the service took place in front of the National Palace to remind Yudhoyono and other government officials not to close their eyes to the plight of the church. He said he hoped that the central government would take concrete steps to stop GKI Yasmin’s experience of discrimination, threats and prohibition of **worship**.

The Coordinator of Religious Freedom Defense Team, Saor Siagian, said that if the president does not order Bogor Mayor Budiarto to carry out the decision of the Supreme Court to remove the seal on GKI Yasmin, then the president will have become a “provocateur.”

“Yes, the president will be a provocateur because he was not firm with his underling, the mayor of Bogor, who refuses to carry out the decision of the Supreme Court,” Saor Siagian told the gathered crowd.

Expelled

The Indonesian president’s appeal for local authorities to work out an agreement with the church came five days after Islamic political parties in the Muslim-majority nation had church representatives ejected from a meeting with the minister of Religion and others.

After twice cancelling meetings, the House of Representatives held a meeting with the coordinating minister for Politics, Law, and Order, the minister of Religion, the minister of the Interior, the Ombudsman and GKI Yasmin church officials on Feb. 8. The GKI delegation included the spokesperson, the lawyer, the pastor, elders and church members along with interfaith groups such as the Islamic Anshor Youth Movement, the Unity in Diversity Alliance, the Setara Institute for Democracy and Peace and others.

Representatives from **Islamic parties** such as the Unified Development Party and the Prosperity and Justice Party protested the presence of the GKI Yasmin members in the room, claiming that other community groups from the Yasmin Park subdivision of Bogor had not been invited.

After 45 minutes of debate, the GKI Yasmin representatives were ejected from the meeting room and told to sit in the balcony. GKI spokesperson Bona Sigalingging said that he was most upset with the order.

“We felt that we were fairly invited here, and we had hoped to speak,” Sigalingging said as the representatives moved to the balcony. “Nevertheless, we will follow the law and honor this body. We are very upset with the order [to move], but we are ready to obey.”

Interior Minister Gamawan Fauzi told the meeting that because the issue was in the midst of a legal process, enforcement of the Supreme Court order should wait.

“We wish this thing to be finished nicely,” he said.

He offered a temporary relocation of the congregation—the Harmony Hotel, 200 meters from the sealed church building.

“It would be a temporary relocation until the building permit problem is settled,” he said.

In addition, Fauzi said that the Bogor government was willing to purchase a piece of land to relocate the church.

“If Bogor doesn’t have enough money to do this, I will help as long as GKI Yasmin worships at that new place,” he said.

He also suggested that the church stop **worshipping** on the roadside strip.

“It is best to worship in a building that the government has suggested,” he said adding that he believed that the problem of permitting a house of worship would be settled amicably within six months.

The House committee requested information from the National Ombudsman, and Vice Ombudsman Azlaini Agus reported that there had been disobedience to legal decisions with the force of law, specifically the decision of the Supreme Court. Agus said the governor of West Java and the mayor of Bogor had not carried out the 2011 recommendation of the ombudsman to rescind the mayoral decree revoking the GKI building permit.

The recommendation was given, Azlaini added, so that the minister of the Interior could oversee its enactment.

“We have done our work,” he said. “If our recommendation is not carried out within 60 days by the governor or the mayor, then we are to send a notice to the president, the House of

Representatives, and to publish the news," he said. "That's as far as our duty goes. The situation has not been resolved, which means that there has been disregard for the decision of the court, which carries the force of law."

The meeting ended with the conclusion that the central government and the Bogor municipal government should resolve the GKI Yasmin problem by involving all elements of the community in a peaceful orderly manner – as soon as possible, but without a time limit.

After the meeting, the GKI spokesperson Sigalingging said that GKI Yasmin firmly rejects moving to another building. According to him, the building the government has designated is not suited for worship.

"We want a suitable place in accord with the recommendations of the Supreme Court and the ombudsman," he said. "Because of this, we will not relocate," he stated.