

Islamists Demand Demolition of Indonesia Churches

The election of a hard-line Islamic governor in Indonesia's Aceh Province last month appears to have opened the way for a crack-down on the minority Christian community, which saw 17 churches sealed shut in early May.

Emboldened by the April 9 election of Zaini Abdullah of the militant Aceh Party (Partai Aceh, or PA), hundreds of Islamists demonstrated in front of the office of Aceh Singkil regency on April 30, demanding area church buildings be not only sealed but demolished.

Christian leaders told Compass that, besides the usual pretext of lack of church permits—applications for which local authorities routinely deny or delay—the demands were based on a controversial agreement that Christians were reportedly forced to sign in 2001 stipulating that there be only one church and four chapels in the regency.

The number of churches in the regency had grown to 22, and the Diakonia Secretary of the Indonesian Fellowship of Churches, Jeirry Simampow, said that the demonstrators were upset with the Interfaith Harmony Forum for allowing the growth of churches in the area.

"The number of Christians has reached 12,000," Simampow said, adding that the church growth has not been accompanied by building permits. "Some houses are forced to function as churches, and some buildings are only semi-permanent."

He noted that there is a strong, systematic movement to close churches in Aceh Singkil based on the selective enforcement of building permit requirements, which are otherwise rarely invoked in Indonesia.

"This is the same thing that happened in Bekasi, where four churches were closed," he said.

Of the 17 churches closed, 11 belong to the Protestant Christian Church of Pakpak Dairi, or GKPPD. The Rev. Elson Lingga, GKPPD district superintendent, told Compass that the mob clamored for the demolition of the church buildings, and that on May 2 a new acting regent had agreed to the demand.

"This position was supported by the police chief, who said that the time for dialog was past—all he wanted was a schedule of the church demolitions," Lingga said. "It's not that Christians do not want to apply for permits, but it is extremely difficult to secure permission even though we have put forth our maximal efforts."

The church closures, which took place May 1-3, included three Catholic buildings, one Huria Kristen Indonesia (Indonesian Christian Church, or HKI), and two chapels.

Police accompanied by demonstrators, who were reportedly organized by the hard-line Islamic Defenders Front, undertook the sealing of the churches, reportedly padlocking the front gate and posting a sign stating, "In 3 x 24 hours, the regency government must tear down this church building."

Aceh Singkil Police Chief Bambang Syafrianto, after listening to the demonstrators on April 30, had suggested that the Christians be given three days to tear down their church buildings, and that an enforcement team would be formed to demolish them if they failed to do so, Lingga said.

"The mob received this suggestion by clapping their hands," he said.

When the enforcement team along with Muslim demonstrators went to the GKPPD church in Siatas the next day, however, dozens of wailing women met them; one woman fainted during the protest, Lingga said. Encountering this resistance, the team relented

and ordered church elders to meet with the regent on May 2.

The enforcement team then went to Paris Lake district, where they were able to close three churches: the Biskang GKPPD church in Napagaluh, the Biskang Catholic church in Napagaluh, and the Catholic church in Sikoran.

On May 2, Lingga and the Rev. Erde Berutu, along with some members from the GKPPD Siatas, met Acting Regent H. Razali, who said the eventual destruction of the church buildings was “not open to question,” Lingga said.

The regent told them that he was not trying to destroy churches but enforce rules regarding the construction of houses of worship, he added.

The next day, May 3, more churches were sealed, including the GKPPD in Siatas, the GKPPD in Siompin, and the GKPPD in Mandumpang.