

# Local Government Overturns Supreme Court Ruling to Persecute Church

Bogor City, 60 kilometres south of the Indonesian capital Jakarta, is reported to be one of the world's most densely populated areas. And, although not an Islamic state, Indonesia is the world's most populous Muslim-majority nation, with 86.1 percent of Indonesians being Muslim, according to the 2000 census.

In April 2010, Bogor's Taman Yasmin Indonesia Christian Church (GKI Yasmin) was closed by order of the Mayor and city government. In December that year, the Indonesian Supreme Court affirmed the church's constitutional right to freedom of worship; however the Mayor refused to reopen the church. The Indonesian Ombudsman's Office also urged the Bogor city administration to withdraw its later 2011 decree annulling the church's construction permit.

But now, in the latest twist in the long-running saga, Indonesia's Interior Minister, along with the Bogor City authorities, decided at a meeting in September that the church would not reopen, but instead should relocate about 7 kilometres away. In addition to the Mayor and Interior Minister, representatives of the Muslim Communications Forum (Forkami)—a hard-line religious group known for its stance against GKI Yasmin—attended the meeting.

Understandably, the church is refusing to comply with this order. "No matter where, no matter how beautiful or how expensive the new location, we will not accept," said the GKI Yasmin spokesman, Bona Sigalingging.

He said if the church was evicted it would mean that the rule of law in Indonesia has collapsed. "There will be a separation

and segregation based on racial intolerance. It means betraying Bhinneka Tunggal Ika.” (Bhinneka Tunggal Ika, the motto of Indonesia, means ‘Unity in Diversity’).

In May this year, in an attempt to break the deadlock, the President’s Advisory Council and the National Defence Council (Wantannas) brokered a month-long negotiation between the church and the Bogor administration to build a mosque adjacent to the church. The church agreed with this suggestion, but it wasn’t enough for the hardliners, who want to see the church gone from the area.

Vice Chairman of the Setara Institute for Democracy and Peace (an Indonesian NGO that conducts research and advocacy on democracy, political freedom and human rights) Bonar Tigor Naipospos, said the meeting had shown that the government tended to solve problems involving minority groups by ruling them out rather than accommodating them.

“Relocation without listening to the voice of victims would violate human rights. Relocation means eviction and law violations. GKI Yasmin objects to being relocated anywhere at anytime,” he said.

“The government keeps suggesting relocations as solutions for the Ahmadis, Shiites and GKI Yasmin’s case. This will only lead to further segregation,” he said.

He also questioned the motive behind the decision. Bonar suspects that the location of the church – near to hospitals, supermarkets and shops—means that the land will be valuable real estate.

GKI Yasmin is one of several examples of the lack of protection for Indonesia’s minority groups.

The church was sealed and padlocked in April, 2010 on the orders of the Mayor of Bogor. He claimed that the church brought trouble with the local Muslim neighbours. Later he said that the church should not be built on a street with an

Islamic name. Its congregation resorted to conducting services on the pavement in front of the church for more than two years. During services outside the church, they constantly faced harassment from groups of protesters – including from Forkami.

Fearing further aggravation from hard-liners, members of the Protestant church now hold clandestine services at the houses of congregation members. They have also conducted Sunday services in front of the State Palace, to further their case with the government.

The Bogor City Government has reportedly allocated land for the replacement church some 7 kilometers from its present location, and a budget of up to 10 billion rupiahs for a new church. But it is by no means certain that, even should the church agree to relocation, they would be allowed to build a new church. Among other things, they would have to obtain a new building permit, which would require them to obtain approval signatures from 60 Muslims and 90 Christians.

Ali Akbar Tanjung from the Human Rights Working Group (HRWG) said that the situation would further taint Indonesia's human rights record. The United Nation Human Rights Council has just started the 14th session (22nd Oct- 5th Nov) of its Universal Periodic Review (UPR), its review of the human rights practices of all States in the world, once every four years.

"The government promised to improve back in May. How can it fulfill its promise if the Home Ministry pressures GKI Yasmin like this?"

A series of recommendations proposed by nations participating in May's UPR discussed the persecution of minority groups in Indonesia, with a recommendation that Indonesia "should strengthen efforts to ensure that any assaults against religious minorities are properly investigated and that those responsible are brought to justice."

The Secretary of the Diakonia Communion of Churches in Indonesia, Jeirry Sumampow, fully supports the stance taken by the GKI Yasmin.

“The government should be consistent in enforcing laws and regulations, and implement the Supreme Court decision,” he said. “We’ll support GKI Yasmin if they refuse relocation.”