

Muslims in Bekasi, Indonesia Oppose Another Church Building

Islamic organizations have mounted a campaign against the planned construction of Mother Teresa Catholic Church in West Java Province, where Christian leaders report 20 other churches have faced Muslim hostility since 2009.

Muslim leaders said plans for the Mother Teresa church in the Lippo Cikarang property project in the Cikarang area will make it the largest church building in Bekasi City. Adang Permana, general chairman of the Bekasi Islamic Youth Movement, said Bekasi area Muslims oppose the church building because they fear it will become “a center of Christianization,” according to the Islamic website .

“This church will become the center of apostasy and clearly disturb the faith of Bekasi citizens, who are mostly Muslims,” Permana said, according to the website. “In addition to rejecting this parish church, we also call for the disbanding of all unauthorized churches in Bekasi Regency [City],” he stated. A church leader, however, said area residents had approved the presence of the church.

Adang said opposition to the church was based in the Islamic roots of the city.

“Historically, sociologically, and demographically, Bekasi cannot be separated from Islam, with the cleric K.H. Noer Ali as one of the founders and developers of the city,” Adang told . “Because of this, we reject the church.”

H.M. Dahlan, coordinator of United Muslim Action of Bekasi, also expressed fear that the church would become a center of Christianization in Bekasi.

"Bekasi Muslims reject the presence of this church," Dahlan said in a letter that he has circulated among mosques in the Bekasi area. In it he states that plans for the Mother Teresa church would make it the largest church building in southeast Asia. The letter has reportedly generated much unrest among area residents.

At a recent press conference, Dahlan said Unified Muslim Action of Bekasi, along with "all Muslims, mosque congregations, leaders of women's study groups, Quranic schools, and Islamic education foundations have firmly decided to reject the construction of Mother Teresa Catholic Church in Cikarang and request that the Bekasi Regency cancel all [construction] plans."

The Islamic groups also called on Bekasi officials to clamp down on "illegal churches" meeting in homes and shops and to block "all forms of Christianization" in the area. Local government officials frequently stall Christian applications for building and worship permits, opening the way for Islamic groups to accuse churches of being "illegal."

The Mother Teresa church applied for a building permit in 2006, but the Bekasi government has not yet acted on the application, said a clergyman from the church identified only as Pangestu. He added that his church has met all requirements of 2006 Joint Ministerial Decrees No. 8 and No. 9, but the permit has still not been granted. The 2006 decrees require at least 60 non-Christian residents to agree to the construction of a church building, and the congregation must have at least 90 members.

The parish now worships at the Trinity School auditorium.

Pangestu said the church has provided school funds for poor children, free clinics, and food for needy neighbors.

"There are no problems between the church and the local people," Pangestu said.

Mother Teresa Catholic Church began worshiping on Jan. 25, 2004. The church plans to build on an 8,000-square meter lot near Trinity School.

The objections from Islamic groups are the latest evidence of Islamic hostility to churches. Theophilus Bela, president of the Jakarta Christian Communication Forum, released a statement this week that 36 churches in Indonesia have been attacked, harassed or otherwise opposed since 2009; 20 of the churches were located in West Java, with six of those in the Bekasi area.

The list is growing, Bela said, and does not yet include recent reports of 10 churches that local authorities were opposing in Mojokerto, East Java Province, and three others that were closed down in Tembilahan, Riau Province.

Still, large-scale attacks on Christians do not happen as they did in the 1990s and before, he said.

“Now the attacks on churches happen only sporadically,” Bela reported. “In 2007 I noted 100 cases of attacks, and in 2008 the figure went down to only 40 cases, and until October 2009 I noted only eight cases of attacks on Christian churches. But with an attack on St. Albert Catholic Church on Dec. 17, 2009, the figure of cases went up again.”