

Religious Tolerance Bill Threatens Indonesian Church

Members of a church in Bogor, West Java, are determined to continue meeting outside their sealed building each Sunday until they are granted freedom to worship inside it, despite a ban on street meetings issued by the local mayor.

“The church will never give up meeting together,” a local source who preferred to remain unnamed said of the Indonesian Christian Church (Gereja Kristen Indonesia, or GKI), in the Yasmin area of Bogor.

The ban on street meetings forced church members to worship at an alternative location on Sunday.

Amid the stand-off, religious freedom for groups such as the Yasmin church would be dramatically reduced under a “Religious Tolerance Bill” under consideration by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, critics of the proposal say. A constitutional debate is raging in Indonesia over the bill.

On Oct. 9, Yasmin church members and police officers clashed on the street in front of the sealed church building over the Christians’ right to meet there. According to local media reports, West Java police are now investigating complaints filed by both sides; a police chief has accused church members of knocking him unconscious, while the church has countersued police for disrupting its service.

In defiance of a Supreme Court order early this year affirming Yasmin’s constitutional right to freedom of worship, Bogor Mayor Diani Budianto canceled the church’s worship permit, locked and sealed their church building and banned church members from meeting on the street. The permit had been hard-earned; under terms of a 2006 Joint Ministerial Decree, all churches must meet strict criteria to qualify for a church

worship permit, including proof of at least 90 church members, signatures of approval from at least 60 local residents, and approval from village officials and a local interfaith forum.

Yasmin church officials have since refused offers from local authorities to relocate to another building, citing the case of the Batak Christian Protestant Church in Bekasi, West Java, evicted from their previous premises and now denied a building permit.

Rights Experts Condemn Bill

Following a sharp rise in similar conflicts over the past two years, the Religious Affairs Ministry is considering the Religious Tolerance Bill, first proposed by the Ministry in 2003 and revived in February following the brutal murder of three members of the Ahmadiyah sect. The group has often been targeted by Islamic radicals for its claim that Muhammad was not the last prophet of Islam.

Religious Affairs Minister Suryadharma Ali, Home Affairs Minister Gamawan Fauzi and Coordinating Minister for People's Welfare Agung Laksono met last week and announced their joint endorsement of the bill to local media.

Bonar Tigor Naipospos, deputy chairman of the Setara Institute for Peace and Democracy, said the bill will simply legitimize existing discriminatory regulations in the 1965 Anti-Blasphemy Law as well as those in the 2006 Joint Ministerial Decree. The decree has contributed to many conflicts, including the current clash in Bogor. The new bill places more stringent limits on proselytizing, constructing places of worship and religious education, according to *The Jakarta Globe*.

Elaine Pearson of Human Rights Watch fears that the law—proposed by the same ministry that has called for a complete ban on Ahmadiyah—will further entrench discrimination against religious minorities.

Dr. Musda Mulia, chair of the Indonesian Conference on

Religion and Peace, told *The Jakarta Post* that many articles in this bill are not compatible with the principles of democracy, pluralism and human rights. Rather than limiting religious activities, the government should ensure that all religions receive equal treatment, he added.

The success or failure of the bill rests on the terminology, Fajar Riza Ul Haq, executive director of the Maarif Institute, told the Globe. "They should have drafted a religious freedom bill instead of this one," he said.

Faith Out of Focus

A European Union delegation is holding a two-day seminar to discuss the conflicts, another local source told Compass on Monday.

"But only moderate Muslims are attending," he said. "If members of the Front Pembela Islam [Islamic Defenders Front, or FPI] and other radical groups had joined in, I'm sure the discussion would have been more helpful."

One participant who attended yesterday told Compass that speakers did not address violence against Christians at all; rather, they emphasized "organizing and maintaining inter-religious dialogue."

Organized jointly by the European Union Delegation to Indonesia and Brunei and Nahdlatul Ulama, one of Indonesia's largest Muslim organizations, the seminar sought to "explore the contribution made by faith organizations to the fulfillment of human rights and the challenges in balancing respect for freedom of religion with other human rights, including the freedom of expression," according to a press release on the E.U. delegation's website.

"We must [ensure] ... that the legitimate assertion of religious belief is reconciled with broader human rights concerns," Julian Wilson, head of the delegation, wrote in the release.

Moderates Urge Government to Act

Moderates of all faiths, however, are frustrated by the government's failure to address these issues.

"I think Yasmin church will just have to stand firm, despite the risk of being roughed up by the police," the source close to the church said. "As we've seen in previous cases, it may take one or more casualties, drawing unwanted media attention locally and internationally, before the government moves in more seriously to protect the Christians."

Moderates were particularly annoyed at the government's failure to address forced church closures.

"As usual, the president sits by and does absolutely nothing, while the mayor of Bogor ignores the Supreme Court rulings and suffers no consequences," one online reader commented at the foot of a *Jakarta Post* story about Yasmin church on Oct. 11.

Local authorities often adopt regulations or bylaws that are at odds with Indonesia's constitution. Rahmat Effendi, acting mayor of Bekasi in West Java, recently banned the Ahmadiyah from "any activity that may be interpreted as an effort to spread its beliefs."

The ban—faithful to Indonesia's 1965 Anti-Blasphemy Law but contrary to constitutional guarantees of religious freedom—came into effect on Oct. 13. Ahmadis in Bekasi have since met under strict police surveillance.

Based on these inconsistencies and the apparent bias in application of existing laws, many Indonesians doubt that the new bill will improve conditions for religious minorities.

"Look at the rising mob crime and violence, the irrational sentencing in the February murders of three Ahmadis, the hate rhetoric in Bogor and the real Islamic violence towards anyone who is not a fundamentalist," a reader identified as Dr. Dez commented on a *Jakarta Globe* story posted yesterday. "These

issues are all inter-related. The bill will drive a further wedge into divided communities, resulting in more violence. Then the new Intelligence Bill will allow victims to be detained as a threat to security.

“Please have a conscience and speak out,” he added. “You are not just safeguarding groups like the Ahmadi, but your children too.”