

Milah Abraham/ Gafatar

Milah Abraham, also (wrongly) known as Gafatar, is a new religious movement¹ based in Indonesia² with roots in Islam. Milah Abraham describes itself as a new, vibrant faith that replaces fallen Islam, which in turn had replaced a decadent Christianity that had similarly supplanted Judaism. The movement claims to have over 50,000 members. Its teachings have also spread to nearby Malaysia.

The founder of this religious community is Ahmad Mushaddeq. He was born in Jakarta in 1945, in the last years of the Dutch colonial rule. During World War II, his father was taken as a forced laborer by the Japanese and never returned, while his mother abandoned him after she married another man. Ahmad Mushaddeq was raised by his deaf grandmother.

Mushaddeq studied sports science in school. He was a talented athlete. At one point, he was a coach on the Indonesian National badminton team. Though he had no formal religious education, he taught himself to read Arabic.

In 1987 he was recruited as a leader of the Islamic State of Indonesia, a hardline movement that wanted Islamic law established throughout the country, but by the turn of the millennium, he said he had a revelation conveying him that he was the Son of God.³

Teachings

By the early 2000s, Mushaddeq proclaimed a version of a new ideology, ultimately called Milah Abraham, which argued that every Abrahamic faith eventually lost its way. Just as Judaism had given way to Christianity, and Christianity to Islam, it was Islam's turn now to give way to a new, vibrant faith, Milah Abraham. This new faith would in turn be superseded by a new iteration of Abrahamic faith centuries from now.

Controversies

Fajar Nusantara Movement, or Gafatar, is a back-to-the-land communitarian movement that promoted organic farming and agricultural self-sufficiency⁴. Its founders regarded Ahmad

¹ According to Prof. Al Makin, there are hundreds of new religious movements in Indonesia and many have faced increasing persecution since the country began transitioning to democracy in 1998. Radical and conservative Muslim groups have used hate speech towards such so-called heretical religious groups.

² Six religious groups have been granted an official status by the Ministry of Religious Affairs in Indonesia: Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Confucianism.

³ Indonesia's Sentencing of 'Son of God' Adds to Alarm Over Crackdown (New York Times, 9th March 2017) https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/09/world/asia/indonesia-blasphemy-laws.html?_r=1

Mushaddeq as the Messiah who was to succeed Muhammad. Those who joined Gafatar are not all followers of Ahmad Mushaddeq, but they were encouraged to learn the teachings of Milah Abraham.

Gafatar is a Civil Society Organization (CSO) established on 14th August 2011. Gafatar was a fast-growing movement. In December 2013, it claimed to have representatives at the Regional Leadership Council (DPD) in all provinces throughout Indonesia. Gafatar was accused of having links with Al Qiyadah Al Islamiyah (Islamic Leadership)⁵, which was declared heretical by the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) and disbanded in 2007.

Human Rights Watch researcher on Indonesia Andreas Harsono⁶ said the government and media should not mislead the public by calling Gafatar a radical Muslim group "They are exclusive, but they are not advocating violence," he told Fairfax Media. "They want to live by themselves, they want to have their own community like the Amish."

Disappearances

In 2015, objections to the movement arose over the alleged disappearance of local Indonesians. Many had left their families, without informing them, to move to the Kalimantan Province and participate in the communal agricultural project of Gafatar. This caused uproar among the public and the authorities.⁷

On 26th January 2016, the Sydney Morning Herald⁸ published an article about the police crackdown of the Gafatar community and mentioned that "a doctor and her six-month-old son disappeared from Yogyakarta in December. She was found two weeks later, living in a Gafatar community in West Kalimantan that had been established four months ago."

Mr Supriyadi⁹, another member of the movement, said he came to Monton Panjang from his home in Surabaya at the end of 2015 in order to farm: "We grow string beans and water spinach. We never stopped communicating with our family, they knew where we were. We practice the

⁴ Gafatar owned 5,000 hectares of lands in Kalimantan. The organization purchased some of them while others were voluntarily donated: <https://en.tempo.co/read/news/2016/01/20/055737834/Gafatar-Has-5000-Hectares-Land-for-Food-Security-Program>

⁵ In 2008, al Qiyadah's leader was prosecuted under Article 156(a) of the Indonesian Penal Code (KUHP) in relation to blasphemy, and he was sentenced to four years' imprisonment.

⁶Indonesia's Sentencing of 'Son of God' Adds to Alarm Over Crackdown (New York Times, 9th March 2017) https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/09/world/asia/indonesia-blasphemy-laws.html?_r=1

⁷ https://www.ecoi.net/file_upload/1930_1458822047_g1603134.pdf

⁸ Indonesia cracks down on 'deviant' sect Gafatar (The Sydney Morning Herald, 26th January 2016) : <http://bit.ly/1PS3jAc>

⁹ Ibid.

Quran just like other Muslims, we pray five times a day. We just finished building our mushola' (Islamic prayer room).”

According to Yudhistira, a former leader of Gafatar, the people who were reported missing were participating in their agricultural program. “They were not missing, they were just participating in the program on their own voluntarily,” he said in a newspaper¹⁰. Yudhistira also reminded the members who would go to Kalimantan to notify their families and relatives. However, it is up to each member to decide what to do, he said.

So far, there are about 20,000 members of Gafatar, from various religious, professional and organizational backgrounds, spread in 34 provinces. “Gafatar has also never participated in the members’ religious beliefs. That is their privacy,” said Yudhistira.

Abuse of weakness

Adi, a former Gafatar caretaker of Central Java, said Gafatar’s funding comes from donations of the members¹¹. Every month, there are voluntary contributions and they can donate any amount, starting from Rp5,000 to Rp10 million, “as long as it’s sincere.”

Dwi Adiyanto¹², 32, a farmer who sold his belongings to buy land with Gafatar in West Kalimantan Province on Borneo, said Milah Abraham provided him with a community and allowed him to “discover the true path for himself.” In late December 2015, Mr. Dwi was called to a local police station and was told to leave the province because Gafatar’s presence was angering locals. Not long after, Mr. Dwi’s new homestead was burned to the ground by mobs.

The police then forced him and about 7,000 other members of the movement to return to their homes on other islands.

Deprogramming

The government set up a program aimed at 'deradicalizing' their members in order to reintegrate them back into their respective communities across the country. The Coordinating Human Development and Culture Ministry's acting secretary-general, Agus Sartono, said that the government would instruct respective local authorities to provide shelter for former members of Gafatar before progressing with the counselling program.¹³

¹⁰ <https://en.tempo.co/read/news/2016/01/20/055737834/Gafatar-Has-5000-Hectares-Land-for-Food-Security-Program>

¹¹ Indonesia’s Sentencing of ‘Son of God’ Adds to Alarm Over Crackdown (New York Times, 9th March 2017) https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/09/world/asia/indonesia-blasphemy-laws.html?_r=1

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Deradicalization for Gafatar, Jakarta Post, 23rd January 2016.

See <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2016/01/23/deradicalization-gafatar.html>

Al Makin, a professor at Sunan Kalijaga State Islamic University in Yogyakarta, testified as an expert witness on behalf of Milah Abraham at the trial of three leaders of the movement in 2017¹⁴. "If the government keeps this policy of arresting people who are different from the mainstream, it means the government denies pluralism," he said.

Human Rights Watch researcher Andreas Harsono¹⁵ said in the aftermath of the police crackdown on the movement on 19th January 2016: "This is religious persecution. It is disturbing. Why should they be re-educated in Islam?"

Milah Abraham Members in Prison

Since 2004, more than 106 people were convicted on blasphemy charges in Indonesia. More than 25 members of the Milah Abraham movement have been convicted on blasphemy charges over the last decade, including 11 who spent time in prison. In 2016, the three leaders of the movement were sentenced to prison terms¹⁶.

Detainees are often charged under:

Article 155a which punishes any person who disseminates, openly demonstrates or posts writing in which feelings of hostility, hatred or contempt against the Government of Indonesia are expressed (maximum imprisonment of four years and six months or a maximum fine of three-hundred Rupiahs¹⁷);

Article 156a.b which prescribes a maximum prison sentence of five years to those who deliberately give expression to feelings or commit an act in public that intend to prevent a person from adhering to any religion;

Article 107 which punishes intent to cause a revolution, punished by a maximum imprisonment of fifteen years, with leaders and originators receiving life imprisonment or a maximum imprisonment of twenty years, and;

Article 110 which targets intent or preparation to commit a crime related to rebellion, attempt to obstruct or defeat a measure taken by the government to prevent or suppress such a crime, or attempt to coerce others to become involved in such a crime, punishable by a maximum imprisonment of six years.

¹⁴ Indonesia's Sentencing of 'Son of God' Adds to Alarm Over Crackdown (New York Times, 9 March 2017) https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/09/world/asia/indonesia-blasphemy-laws.html?_r=1

¹⁵ Deradicalization for Gafatar, Jakarta Post, 23 January 2016.

See <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2016/01/23/deradicalization-gafatar.html>

¹⁶ <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2016/05/26/legal-aid-lawyers-protest-against-detention-of-ex-gafatar-members.html> ; <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/indonesia-imprisons-leaders-deviant-religious-group-blasphemy-charges-1610334>.

¹⁷ Approximately €4.

Ahmad MUSHADDEQ was imprisoned for blasphemy for the first time in 2008, but was released halfway through his four-year term after he signed a letter renouncing his claim to be Muhammad's successor. He was arrested again on 25 May 2016 alongside **Mahful Muis TUMANURUNG and Andri CAHYA**, two other leaders of the movement, for blasphemy, treason and membership in the banned Fajar Nusantara Movement (Gafatar).

On **7th March 2017**, the East Jakarta District Court sentenced **Ahmad MUSHADDEQ** to a **five-year prison term**. He was indicted on the basis of Articles 155a and 156a.b of the Criminal Code.

Andri CAHYA and Mahful Muis TUMANURUNG were indicted on the basis of Articles 107 and 110 of the Criminal Code. On **7th March 2017**, they were **respectively sentenced to three and five years in prison** by the East Jakarta District Court.

In **October 2016**, the Sleman District Court sentenced a couple, **Eko PURNOMO and Veni ORINANDA**, to **two years and one year in prison respectively**, for allegedly abducting a physician, Rica Tri Handayani, and luring her to join the 'illegal' group¹⁸. They had been arrested on 30th December 2015 in Yogyakarta.

They were indicted on the basis of Articles 332 of the Criminal Code (Being guilty of an abduction of a female, (a) with a maximum punishment of seven years in prison if the abductee is underage, taken without consent of her parents, but with consent from the abductee, whether or not the intent was to control the abductee either within or outside of a marriage; (b) with a maximum punishment of nine years in prison if the abduction was conducted using tricks, force, threat of force, whether or not the intent was to control the abductee either within or outside of a marriage)

Rica Tri Handayani denied the kidnapping. She testified in court that she was not abducted but that she went to West Kalimantan of her own free will and even bought her own plane ticket.

Conclusions

A clear distinction must be made between the new religious movement Milah Abraham and the social organization Gafatar although the membership of both entities seems to largely overlap.

Article 18 of the ICCPR reads:

¹⁸ <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2016/10/01/gafatar-couple-sentenced-prison.html>

(1): Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom [...] either individually or in community with others and in public or private to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.

(2): No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.

(3): Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.'

Milah Abraham and its members are entitled to enjoy the rights protected by Article 18 of the ICCPR and Article 6 of the UN Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief.

Milah Abraham does not represent any threat for the state and society in Indonesia.