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Ahok's appeal 'last chance' to clear name

World Watch Monitor (26.02.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2FazZe6> - A first appeal hearing in the blasphemy case of the Christian former governor of Jakarta was held today (26 February) in what could prove his only chance to challenge the verdict.

Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, better known as "Ahok", has asked the Supreme Court for a review of the two-year prison sentence he received in May 2017. He was convicted on the basis of a video in which he argued against use of the Quran for political purposes – comments for which he was later adjudged to have committed blasphemy.

Since the former governor went directly to the Supreme Court, it "could be Ahok's last chance to overturn his conviction", explained Moses Ompusunggu for the Jakarta Post, as the number of reviews by the court is limited.

After today's hearing at the North Jakarta District Court, which lasted only ten minutes, Ahok's lawyer and sister, Fifi Lety Indra, told reporters the basis of the appeal was the conviction in November last year of Buni Yani, a communications professor from Jakarta.

Yani was found guilty of tampering with the video on which Ahok appeared. The video caused widespread unrest in the Muslim-majority nation and a turning of public opinion against Ahok who, at that time, was running for re-election.

"The legal argument for our petition is that the judges [at the district level] made a mistake in their verdict [on Ahok], particularly in relation to Buni Yani's verdict," Ahok's sister explained.

The prosecutors, who will have a chance to respond in two to three days, maintained that the two cases were not connected and that Yani's conviction did not constitute "new evidence".

Once both parties have been heard, the case will be forwarded to the Supreme Court, which will then decide whether or not to review the case.

"Ahok was guilty of blasphemy, while Buni Yani was guilty of tampering with a video that was not his," one of the prosecutors, Sapta Subrata, said. "The evidence in Buni Yani's case is part of a speech cited by Buni Yani, it was not used as evidence in Ahok's trial."

Abdul Fickar Hadjar, a criminal law expert from Trisakti University in Jakarta, told the Jakarta Post also that "the decision [on Yani] had yet to be declared final and binding", as Yani is also considering an appeal.

A hard-line Muslim group, Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), which was involved in leading major protests in Jakarta during Ahok's trial, has called on the court to reject the appeal.

Since his sentencing in May last year, Ahok has been held at the Police's Mobile Brigade Command Headquarters in West Java. He is due to be released in May 2019, but could be released earlier if remissions are taken into account.

Indonesia church attacker acted alone, police say

World Watch Monitor (15.02.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2ofZIYE> - The man accused of injuring four people in an attack on an Indonesian church on Sunday morning (11 February) acted alone and obtained the weapon – a one-metre-long sword – in exchange for his mobile phone, police say.

The suspect, a 23-year-old student identified as Sulyono from Bayuwangi in East Java, had attempted to travel to Syria and had shown signs of being radicalised, The Straits Times reported.

But so far, no evidence has been found that he was linked with a wider extremist network, a police spokesman said, according to the newspaper. It appears he acted as a lone-wolf when he entered the St. Lidwina Catholic Church in the city of Yogyakarta on Sunday morning and allegedly injured the 81-year-old priest, Father Karl-Edmund Prier, as well as two other church members and a police officer, before he was taken down by a gunshot to his thigh. Church statuary were also damaged in the attack. In a video that went viral he can be seen waving a sword at the front of the church.

Sulyono was charged on Tuesday, 13 February, under three different laws related to persecution, sharp-weapon ownership and terrorism. A conviction under the 2003 terrorism law carries the possibility of the death penalty.

Local sources told World Watch Monitor that Sulyono was an alumnus of an Islamic boarding school in East Java and known by the villagers as a good Quran reader. According to police, he was radicalised as a student in Sulawesi when he joined several religious organisations.

Religious freedom

A day after the attack, Indonesia President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo said there was no room for intolerance. "Our Constitution guarantees religious freedom," he said. "We will not give even the slightest amount of room to those who promote and spread intolerance in our country. Especially those who act with violence."

Moderate Muslim leaders condemned the attack. "The act of assault and violence is not part of any religious teachings and beliefs," Helmy Faishal Zaini, general secretary of Nahdlatul Ulama, the country's largest moderate Muslim organisation, told the Catholic news agency UCAN. "Islam condemns acts of violence, especially if it is done in houses of worship."

The radicalisation of Indonesian youth was highlighted during the 2017 blasphemy trial of Jakarta's former Governor, Ahok, a Christian and ethnic Chinese.

In November, World Watch Monitor reported that a survey of 4,000 high-school and university students showed nearly 20 per cent "support the establishment of a [Muslim]

caliphate over the current secular government” and that one in four was willing to fight to achieve this.

'Guarantee protection'

Earlier this month, Catholics from another church in Yogyakarta were confronted by a group of local Muslims, who claimed that through their social work, Christians were attempting to convert people to their faith.

Father Endra Wijayanto, head of the Justice and Peace Commission of the Archdiocese of Yogyakarta, called on the police to “guarantee protection and security to churches” and to assume “a proactive attitude to prevent further episodes of violence, protecting the fundamental rights of all Indonesian citizens, without exception”. In a statement sent to Agenzia Fides, he said the Church “actively supports the values of Pancasila [the philosophical foundation of the Indonesian state] and the Constitution of 1945, which guarantees freedom of religion and worship [and] the protection of human rights for Indonesian citizens”.

'Decree 'abused'

Meanwhile, however, about 450 religious leaders have said that a decree regulating places of worship has been abused by some local government authorities to block the construction of churches. According to UCAN the 2006 decree “states that religious officials should provide the signatures of 90 worshippers, as well as signed support from at least 60 residents. Village heads also need to approve the building of a new church or other place of worship”.

This has made it difficult for churches to obtain a building permit and over the years hundreds of churches have been closed for failing to show the necessary documentation when questioned. This has resulted in many Protestants finding alternative places, gathering in shopping malls or outside, as is the case for example with the GKI Yasmin Church in Bogor, West Java. For the past seven years the church has been holding open-air services outside the Presidential palace after it was closed down and pastors were later told they could reopen only if they also allowed a mosque on the premises.

On the most recent Open Doors World Watch List of the 50 countries where it is most difficult to live as a Christian, Indonesia rose from 46th position last year to 38th in 2018.

“The situation for Christians has deteriorated in the course of recent years,” Open Doors said.

Judges: ICE Can't Deport 100 Christians to Indonesia

Immigrants in New Hampshire and New Jersey 'fear persecution and torture' back home

By Griffin Paul Jackson

Christianity Today (06.02.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2nYEAoY> - On February 1, a federal judge put a halt to the deportation of about 50 Indonesian Christians living in New Hampshire.

The next day, a different judge took the same measure to protect another 50 Indonesian Christians in New Jersey.

Despite an ongoing crackdown by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) on immigrants living in the United States illegally, these 100 Christians from Southeast Asia can breathe a little easier—for now.

In the New Hampshire case, US District Judge Patti Saris gave the immigrants living mostly in the state's coastal towns 90 days to reopen their cases once they receive the necessary paperwork.

Most of the endangered immigrants are counted among a group of about 2,000 ethnic Chinese Indonesian Christians who fled violence in their home country two decades ago. Each of them entered the United States legally, typically via tourist visas now long overstayed. While some have been granted legal status, others—including the dozens now threatened with deportation—have seen their applications denied or stalled.

The immigrants have held jobs, raised families, and lived peacefully in the US over the last 20 years. But their reprieve granted under previous administrations has ended as President Donald Trump emphasized a policy of removing illegal aliens.

'The Last Fight'

"This is a hard case," said Saris at a hearing, according to Reuters. "These are good and decent people who have stayed here with our blessing and were given work authority and haven't violated the opinions we imposed on them."

In her opinion, Saris concluded that the 90-day pause was warranted in light of the potentially deadly circumstances that may await Christians forcibly returned to Indonesia.

"A brief delay in unlawful deportation of residents who have lived here with government permission for over a decade outweighs the public interest in prompt execution of removal orders, where petitioners have been law-abiding and pose no threat to public safety," Saris wrote.

The immigrants have lived in the US for years, protected since 2010 by a now-defunct humanitarian program called "Operation Indonesian Surrender." However, beginning in August of last year, as these individuals attended their regular ICE check-ins, they were informed of their impending deportation.

The plight of the dozens of Indonesian Christians in the New Jersey case is similar. In that case, US District Judge Esther Salas granted a temporary stay to deportations in response to a lawsuit put forth by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU).

<http://cvnteyes.co/2FizBWi>

New Hampshire governor, Chris Sununu, lauded the decision in his state and affirmed the court's call for further re-examination in the case. "I will continue to advocate for a resolution that protects these individuals from religious persecution and allows them to remain in the United States," he stated.

Lee Gelernt, an attorney with the ACLU, critiqued ICE tactics in the case and expressed relief at the stay. "The ruling ensures that the fundamental principles of habeas corpus and due process will not be discarded in the rush to deport these longtime residents," he told Law360.

Sandra Pontoh, pastor of the Madbury Maranatha Indonesian Fellowship in Madbury, New Hampshire, also rejoiced at the ruling.

"I was hoping the judge would decide to let my friends work on their case for 90 days. That is what we hoped," Pontoh told the Associated Press. "This is wonderful. That means my friends can have time, their lawyers will have more time to work on their cases. This is the last fight for them."

Battles for Religious Freedom in Indonesia

Indonesia ranks No. 38 on Open Doors's World Watch List, which tracks the most dangerous countries for Christians. After moves toward increased openness and democratic freedoms over the last two decades, Indonesia has sent mixed messages on persecution in recent years.

Last year, the Christian governor of Jakarta, the capital of Indonesia, was convicted of blasphemy against Islam. The governor, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, popularly known as Ahok, received a two-year jail sentence for challenging political rivals on their use of the Qur'an to dissuade the country's Muslims from voting for a non-Muslim.

Social, political, and religious forces have converged against Christians in the country that is home to the largest Muslim population in the world. Especially following Ahok's conviction, fringe Islamist groups have leveraged increased political influence. A 2006 law allegedly promoting "religious harmony" prompted the closure or destruction of more than 1,000 Indonesian churches. In 2015, threats against churches ultimately scared thousands of Christians from their homes in the nation's Aceh province.

However, the last year has been somewhat more measured. Ahok's replacement in Jakarta, Anies Baswedan, has attempted to reach out to the archipelago's embittered Christians, inviting them to host their public Christmas celebration at the city's National Monument. (The Christians expressed appreciation, but rejected the offer.) In a far more significant move that came last November, Indonesia's top court discarded the national requirement that compelled citizens to identify with one of six religions on their national identification cards.

According to Open Doors, Indonesia is on an overall negative trajectory in terms of freedom and protections for Christians. The continuing persecution of Christians in Indonesia provided the US judges grounds for staying deportation orders, as it is considered unconstitutional to deport immigrants to countries where they are likely to face persecution or torture.

A Temporary Respite

In New Jersey, four Indonesian Christian men sought refuge in the Reformed Church of Highland Park last month to avoid deportation. One of the men, Harry Pangemanan, who watched as two companions were arrested while he fled to the church, has a wife and two children and is an elder at the church. He helped rebuild hundreds of homes in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy. The court ruling means these men can now leave the church without fear of arrest for deportation.

"Praise God," Pangemanan told USA Today. "I feel so much relief and for my daughters. There's still so much to do, but I just praise God for what we have now."

Reformed Church of Highland Park's pastor, Seth Kaper-Dale, is familiar with the predicament facing some of his congregants. In 2006, more than three dozen men connected to the church community were deported. Last year, eight Indonesian refugees moved into the church to find sanctuary in light of increased ICE threats of removal.

At the time, Kaper-Dale received a call from Arino Massie, an Indonesian Christian and one of his flock, saying, "Pastor, I'm already on the plane. I'm headed for Japan. Thanks for all the efforts of the community. Tell the community I love them. Tell my son I love him."

The 100 Indonesian Christians in New Hampshire and New Jersey are now fighting a legal battle that, if lost, could lead them to the same fate that befell Massie.

For the moment, however, some of the pressure is off.

Judges Saris and Salas have rejected ICE's deportation initiatives for the time being. But the long-term threat is no less potent.

"Under this Kafkaesque procedure," wrote Saris in her opinion, "[the Indonesian Christians] will be removed back to the very country where they fear persecution and torture while awaiting a decision on whether they should be subject to removal because of their fears of persecution and torture."#

West Java had highest number of religious freedom violations in 2017, Jakarta close behind: Setara Institute

Setara (16.01.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2G9DfmB> - Many people have been concerned about a general rise in religious intolerance throughout Indonesia over the last few years, and the Setara Institute has been carefully documenting specific incidents in which religious freedoms have been violated to highlight which areas of the archipelago have become the most problematic.

According to the Indonesia-based NGO, which conducts research and advocacy on democracy, political freedom and human rights issues, last year there were 201 incidences of religious freedom being violated across Indonesia's 26 provinces. And West Java has the unenviable distinction of being the region with the highest number of violations.

"In West Java there were 29 incidents, in Jakarta 26 incidents, in Central Java 14, East Java 12 and Banten 10," Setara Institute researcher Halili said at the NGO's office yesterday as quoted by Kompas.

According to Halili, out of the 201 violations, 75 were acts involving government officials, including local administrations, police, schools and courts. The other 126 incidences involved individuals or non-governmental organizations such as the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) and the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI).

The report shows that most of the violations were directed at minority religious groups including Christians, Confucians, Buddhists, Hindus and Shiites, with incidents including intimidation, discrimination, assault, hate speech, bans on worship and the sealing of houses of worship.

Setara and others argue that the weakening of religious freedoms is due to both the strengthening and spread of intolerant organizations as well as weak governmental agencies and policies that do little to combat these organizations (when they're not actively enabling them).

Last year, Setara ranked Jakarta as the least tolerant city in Indonesia (worse even than Banda Aceh), in part due to its high number of reported religious freedom violations as well as the “politicization of religious identity” during the 2017 gubernatorial election.
