

# Indonesian Buddhist woman's blasphemy conviction upheld

*– Supreme Court backs Meiliana's 18-month jail sentence but her lawyer says she is a 'victim of a hoax'.*

– by [Aisyah Llewellyn](#)

– Al Jazeera (08.04.2019) – <https://bit.ly/2IjvqiJ-Indonesia>'s Supreme Court has upheld an 18-month jail sentence for a 44-year-old Buddhist woman convicted last year on blasphemy charges.

Meiliana's conviction last August stemmed from a complaint filed after she was accused of making remarks against mosque loudspeakers in the city of Tanjung Balai in North Sumatra nearly three years ago.

Her lawyer Ranto Sibarani said that his client was a "victim of a hoax," denying she made those remarks.

"There is no evidence that she committed blasphemy. This hoax spread in the course of a week and ruined a woman's life in the process," Sibarani told Al Jazeera.

"Today's decision is very dangerous because in the future it means that people can spread false information which will lead to wrongful convictions under the blasphemy law."

The case is based on an incident on July 22, 2016 when Meiliana, an ethnic Chinese-Buddhist resident of Medan, purportedly made a complaint to her neighbour, Kasini, who like many Indonesians only goes by one name.

Kasini claimed that Meiliana asked for the azan, the Islamic call to prayer, to be turned down at the local al-Mashum

mosque. Her version has been disputed and the ensuing blasphemy conviction widely criticised by [human rights](#) groups, including [Amnesty International](#) Indonesia.

In the days and weeks that followed the initial incident, comments were widely shared on [social media](#) stating that Meiliana, a mother of four, had tried to stop the mosque from broadcasting the call to prayer.

A mob in Tanjung Balai set fire to Meiliana's front lawn while two of her four children were inside her home. They escaped with the help of a Muslim pedicab driver who happened to be passing at the time.

Members of the mob were then called as witnesses at the trial which took place in Medan District Court between June and August last year.

Sibarani said there was insufficient evidence against Meiliana to warrant a custodial sentence.

"The hoax was legitimised by the court. The judge allowed a statement letter to be submitted as evidence by three witnesses outside Meiliana's house," he said.

"They claimed she told them the prayer call hurt her ears while a gang confronted her and pelted her home with rocks and bottles. Yet there is no evidence that this conversation ever happened and the statement letter was written six months after the incident."

Indonesia has the world's largest Muslim population but it also is home to sizeable numbers of Buddhist and Christian minorities.

The alleged remarks also kicked off some of the worst race riots since the fall of Suharto in 1998. At least 11 Buddhist temples were torched in Tanjung Balai, where Buddhists number around 11,000 out of 185,000 residents.

There has been widespread criticism of Indonesia's blasphemy law, which in recent years has been wielded against minority groups including the former governor of Jakarta, Basuki "Ahok" Tjahaja Purnama.

Ahok was sentenced to two years in prison for insulting Islam following comments he made about a verse from the Quran in 2016.

According to Sibarani, Meiliana's legal team are now considering their final legal options.

"We believe that video evidence of the discussion outside Meiliana's home exists and we plan to use it to file a judicial review," he said. "If this case is not followed up then it means that anyone can now file a statement letter to a judge accusing someone of blasphemy without having to prove it."

"This case shows that there is no legal certainty in Indonesia any more."

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## **Countering extremism in Indonesia and beyond**

Religious Freedom Institute (<https://bit.ly/2KP2a10>) – Between May 8 and May 14, 2018 Indonesia was hit by a wave of ISIS terrorist attacks, including bombings carried out by families—fathers, mothers, and children together. The principal targets were churches and police stations, including the headquarters of the paramilitary Police Mobile Brigade (which is also where Ahok, the former Governor of Jakarta and a Christian, is serving a sentence for blasphemy). In the wave

of attacks, thirteen terrorists and fourteen others were killed, and more than 40 were injured.

The Indonesian government's security forces responded strongly. There were some early arrests and then, on May 31, in a series of raids, anti-terrorist squads arrested 41 terror suspects and killed 4 others. These raids came less than a week after the May 25 passage of a new anti-terrorism law that criminalized overseas terror attacks and allowed for longer detention of suspects. The bill had been languishing in parliament for two years amid controversies over how strict it should be and how to define terrorism, but this the wave of deadly suicide attacks persuaded lawmakers the bill should be passed.

But a much more low-key event may signal broader changes in how Indonesia is approaching its effort to combat extremism.

On May 31, Indonesian President Joko Widodo appointed Kyai Haji Yahya Cholil Staquf (Pak Yahya) as a member of the Presidential Advisory Council. Pak Yahya is from one of Indonesia's most distinguished Muslim families, is the Secretary-General of the Supreme Council of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the world's largest Muslim organization, and is the head of Gerkan Pemuda Ansor (ANSOR), NU's young-adult wing, which has some 5 million members. He is also among the Muslim world's most incisive and outspoken reformers.

NU has long been engaged in ideological combat with Islamist extremism. In May 2017, Ansor called together more than 300 international religious scholars to consider the "obsolete tenets of classical Islamic law" that call for "perpetual conflict with those who do not embrace or submit to Islam." This gathering issued the Ansor "Declaration on Humanitarian Islam," that built on the May 16, 2016, NU-hosted International Summit of Moderate Islamic Leaders (ISOMIL).

The "Declaration on Humanitarian Islam," is far more self-

critical than declarations that have come from the Middle East. It argues that there are elements within classical Islam that are problematic and need to be changed. At the press conference announcing the Declaration, Ansor Chairman Yaqut Qoumas stated "It is false and counterproductive to claim that the actions of al-Qaeda, ISIS, Boko Haram and other such groups have nothing to do with Islam, or merely represent a perversion of Islamic teachings. They are, in fact, outgrowths of Wahhabism and other fundamentalist streams of Sunni Islam."

Pak Yahya reemphasized these themes and expressed them in an even more radical fashion in a July 18, 2017, address to the Council of the European Union Terrorism Working Party, many of whose members would have accused the speaker of Islamophobia if he had been anyone else. He stressed:

"Western politicians should stop pretending that extremism and terrorism have nothing to do with Islam. There is a clear relationship between fundamentalism, terrorism, and the basic assumptions of Islamic orthodoxy. So long as we lack consensus regarding this matter, we cannot gain victory over fundamentalist violence within Islam."

"Within the classical tradition, the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims is assumed to be one of segregation and enmity."

"Why, no matter how many [terrorists] we kill or put in jail, new recruits are always coming to join them? Here is the fact: the problem lies within Islam itself. Jihadist doctrine, goals and strategy can be readily traced to specific elements of orthodox, authoritative Islam and its historic practice, including those portions of fiqh-classical Islamic law or shari'ah-that enjoin Islamic supremacy."

While NU as a whole has not endorsed the "Declaration on Humanitarian Islam," Pak Yahya told me they are discussing it and he has suffered little criticism for his statements. The

arguments that he and Ansor are making are radical, and crucial in the battle with extremism. And they are gaining increasing attention in Indonesia and around the world.

On May 17, 2018, Pak Yahya met with Vice President Pence for the second time. And the fact that Indonesian President Jokowi has now appointed him to his Advisory Council sends a strong signal about Jokowi's own attitudes.

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