

INDONESIA: Buddhist who complained about muezzin voice gets 18 months in prison

In July 2016, complaints by an ethnic Chinese Buddhist woman triggered one of the worst episodes of anti-Buddhist violence in Tanjung Balai (North Sumatra). For a leader of Nahdlatul Ulama, the largest moderate Islamic movement in the country and the world, the verdict was “inappropriate”.

By Mathias Hariyadi

AsiaNews.it (22.08.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2nZuPau>– The Medan District Court in North Sumatra province sentenced an ethnic Chinese Buddhist woman to 18 months of prison for “offending Islam”.

Meiliana (pictured), a 44-year-old resident of Tanjung Balai, was accused of blasphemy in 2016 for saying that the azan (the Islamic call to prayer) of a nearby mosque was “too noisy” and “harmful” to her ears.

In reading his decision yesterday, Judge Wahyu Prasetyo Wibowo accepted the prosecution’s argument, and found the accused guilty of violating x Articles 156 and 156a of the Penal Code, which are controversial.

The prosecution based its case on a fatwa issued by the local chapter of the Council of the Indonesian ulema (MUI), which had described Meiliana's behaviour as "blasphemous".

For years, human rights activists have called for the repeal or modification of the existing rules concerning blasphemy, noting that in such cases MUI fatwas often influence courts and law enforcement.

In July 2016, Meiliana's remarks triggered one of the worst episodes of sectarian violence in Tanjung Balai regency. Feeling offended, groups of Islamic extremists torched at least six Buddhist temples and houses of prayer.

The police arrested 19 people for their involvement in the riots: eight were indicted for plunder, nine for property destruction and two for inciting violence. All defendants received sentences of one to four months in prison.

Meiliana is one of the first people to be sent to prison for complaining about the volume of loudspeakers used by muezzins, despite an appeal from the Council of Indonesian mosques that invites the latter to use their equipment "wisely".

The sentence against her has been harshly criticised by the Executive Council of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), which, with 90 million members, is the largest moderate Islamic movement in the country and the world.

Nu leaders describe the ruling as “inappropriate”, noting the “baselessness of the criteria judges and government regulations use to define the defamatory nature of the incriminating statements”.

Speaking about the matter, Robikin Emhas, head of Human Rights Office of NU’s Executive Council, said: “I do not think that Meiliana’s complaints about the ‘annoying’ call to prayer are an act of religious defamation. They do not express hatred or hostility against believers.”

“As a moderate Muslim I think that what Meiliana did should be considered as ‘constructive’ criticism by Muslims in Tanjung Balai, who live with people with different ethnic and cultural backgrounds.”

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