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INDONESIA: Call to end bias against followers of indigenous traditional faiths

Call to end bias against traditional faiths

Despite a ruling from the Constitutional Court, followers of indigenous faiths still lack full recognition from the state

By Katharina Reny Lestari

UCA News (22.11.2022) – <https://bit.ly/3XBn4qG> – Religious leaders in Indonesia have urged the government and society to bring an end to what they call various forms of discrimination against followers of traditional faiths in the Muslim-majority Southeast Asian nation.

“The root of the problem is clear enough, which is the lack of the state’s full recognition of traditional faiths that traditional faiths are real, and their followers live in the society. It is an irony in a nation that promotes religious tolerance and harmony,” reads a statement from an interfaith gathering held Nov. 16-19 at Cigugur of Kuningan district in West Java province.

The *Maklumat Cigugur* (Cigugur Declaration) resulted from the gathering that drew leaders from Buddhism, Catholicism, Hinduism, Islam, and Protestantism as well as traditional faiths. It was organized by the Communion of Churches in Indonesia (PGI), the country’s largest inter-church forum.

The declaration decried that “intolerance and discrimination are still systematically faced by followers of traditional faiths.”

The faith leaders urged the government to end all acts hindering public services to followers of traditional faiths and encouraged social elements to uphold the values of humanity and national unity.

Followers of traditional faiths say they continue to face discrimination in the country.

Engkus Ruswana, a follower of *BudiDaya*, a traditional Sundanese faith and coordinator of the Indonesian Native Faiths Council, told UCA News on Nov. 21 that in October he came to know about the ordeal faced by a 20-year-old follower of the indigenous faith, Marapu.

The parents of the boy were forced to list themselves as Protestants in the religion column in the family certificate and identity cards before he was admitted to a school on Sumba Island in Christian-majority East Nusa Tenggara province.

The school required 'a baptism certificate' for admission, which the parents didn't have.

The boy faced a similar situation when he applied for an identity card, he said.

Indonesia officially recognizes six religions – Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Hinduism.

Ruswana said that the boy was aware that a ruling by the Constitutional Court declared unconstitutional the 2013 Civil Administration Law and paved the way for followers of traditional faiths to have their beliefs officially recognized by the government.

"So, he wanted to replace 'Protestantism' on the religion column of his identity card with *Kepercayaan terhadap Tuhan Yang Maha Esa* (trust in God Almighty). But he could not do that as he was told his parents are still listed as Protestants. He must follow his parents," he said.

According to the law, identity cards should include elements of citizens' data including religion, and the religion column should be left blank for citizens whose religions are not yet recognized and for followers of traditional beliefs.

Followers of four traditional faiths filed for a judicial review in 2016, arguing that the law violated the principle of equality before the law. The court said articles in the law that required people adopting traditional faiths to leave the religion column in their identity cards blank were discriminatory.

After consultations with various religious leaders, the government decided that the religion column on identity cards for traditional faith followers would be replaced with a traditional faith column without listing the faith's specific name. Instead, it would have the phrase, trust in God Almighty.

There are 187 traditional faiths in Indonesia with about 12 million followers.

Iwan Setiawan, 40, a follower of the indigenous faith Kapribaden, from Jakarta claimed that he has not yet received his identity card with the sanctioned phrase written in the religion column though he submitted the application in 2019.

"I checked with local authorities this year. But they said it is not ready yet. One even told me that there are only six recognized religions. They do not really understand about the latest policy or what?" he told UCA News.

Nilna Rusyda, a Muslim from the Kuningan chapter of the Interfaith Women Network, said Muslims do not have any objection toward full recognition of traditional faiths.

"We respect them. Even though we adhere to different faiths, we have the same rights as citizens. Let us be united in kindness," she told UCA News.

Reverend Jimmy Sormin, executive secretary of the PGI's Witness and Integrity of Creation Desk, said that PGI has made freedom of religion a major priority since 2019.

"PGI needs to respond to the issue of freedom of religion. It is because there are still challenges particularly faced by followers of traditional faiths," he told UCA News.

"What we have done so far is we invited all members of PGI to transform our mission: how we proclaim the Gospel for the sake of justice for all people whose rights are not fully

recognized yet," he said.

Photo: In this photo taken in August 2016, women followers of some of Indonesia's traditional beliefs and indigenous faiths, offer prayers during a recent gathering in Jakarta. (Photo: Katharina R. Lestari)

Further reading about FORB in Indonesia on HRWF website

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