

# INDONESIA: Extremism Advances in the Largest Muslim Country

*Indonesia's president, once considered an ally of religious minorities, puts a radical cleric on his ticket.*

By Benedict Rogers

Wall Street Journal (17.09.2018) – <https://on.wsj.com/2D3KjVg> – Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim nation, has long stood as a role model for religious pluralism. That's changing. Political Islam and violent extremism have been taking root in society and may soon do so in the government. President Joko Widodo's choice of Ma'ruf Amin, a 75-year-old cleric, as his running mate in next year's election marks an ugly turn for Indonesian politics.

Religious minorities had regarded Mr. Widodo as their defender. His rival, retired general Prabowo Subianto, was expected to play the religion card, questioning the incumbent's Islamic credentials and building a coalition supported by radical Islamists. By choosing Mr. Amin, the president's defenders argue, he not only has neutralized the religion factor, but might have prevented it from spilling over into violence against minorities. In office, they believe, Mr. Amin will be contained.

Yet Mr. Subianto is unlikely to be deterred from playing identity politics, and rumors that Mr. Amin is reaching out to radical Islamists for support are troubling. Mr. Amin has a history of intolerance. He signed a fatwa that put a Widodo

ally, Jakarta's former Gov. Basuki Tjahaja "Ahok" Purnama, in jail on blasphemy charges. Ahok, who is Christian and ethnically Chinese, was a symbol of Indonesia's diversity, and as a popular governor was expected to be re-elected. Instead he lost after rivals told Muslims not to vote for a non-Muslim.

Mr. Amin also signed the anti-Ahmadiyya fatwa in 2005, which led to severe restrictions and violence against the Ahmadiyya, an Islamic sect some Muslims regard as heretical. I met recently with Ahmadis in Depok, a Jakarta suburb, where their mosque is closed. The previous week they were visited by 15 local officials ordering them to stop all activities.

Mr. Amin has been behind other repressive measures, including restrictions on the construction of places of worship, proposals to criminalize homosexuality, support for female genital mutilation and local Shariah laws.

Indonesia's pluralism has come under increasing threat. Local authorities, under pressure from Islamic extremists, forced hundreds of churches to close. While there have been few closures since Mr. Widodo took office, the Rev. Gomar Gultom, general secretary of Indonesia's Communion of Churches, says "there has been no justice for old cases." Authorities continue to misuse blasphemy laws. A Buddhist woman in North Sumatra was jailed for 18 months for asking a mosque to turn down the volume on its loudspeakers.

Last month a foreign scholar who has lived in Indonesia for more than half a century told me of a Muslim man who asked his

12-year-old son what he had learned at school one day. “We learned about kafir”—infidels—his son replied. When the father asked what they had learned, the boy replied: “We learned that they must be killed.”

Last year, in Yogyakarta, a Christian man told me his 15-year-old daughter’s best friend, a Muslim, had told her that they could no longer be friends: “After Ahok’s case, my God does not allow me to be friends with people like you.”

These anecdotes are reinforced by news footage that shows marching children at a kindergarten in east Java, dressed in black robes and face veils, wielding realistic-looking toy rifles, with the theme “Fight with the Messenger of Allah to Increase Faith and Piety.” As Mr. Gultom told me, “The seed of radicalization has spread throughout Indonesia.”

Religious intolerance and terrorism aren’t the same, but as the Wahid Foundation’s Alamsyah M. Djafar told me, “if intolerance increases, the threat of radicalism increases, and that will change the face of Indonesia.” And on May 13 a family of suicide bombers attacked three churches in Surabaya within minutes of each other. The parents strapped explosives onto their daughters, 6 and 8, and their teenage sons. At least 13 people were killed.

Three months later, I visited all three churches. I heard two key messages, which offer some hope for Indonesia. The first was from the victims, and can be summed up in one word: forgiveness. Father Aloysius Widyawan, a priest at Santa Maria Tak Bercela Catholic Church, told me that the consistent

message from his parishioners was: "We must love others, we forgive the attackers, we do not want revenge." One woman who lost two sons, 8 and 12, in the attacks, said: "I have already forgiven the bombers. I don't want to cry anymore. I know that our Mother Mary also lost her son, Jesus. I forgive."

The second message was from Muslims who reject extremism. Within hours of the bombings, they came to clear up the wreckage. At Jakarta's cathedral that evening, two Muslim women arrived at Mass, offering red and white roses, the colors of Indonesia's flag.

President Trump's administration has made the promotion of international religious freedom a priority. If it is serious, the U.S. should work to strengthen the voices of moderate Indonesian Muslims. At the same time, Indonesian politicians whose heart is with the defenders of pluralism must stop playing identity politics and stand up to the preachers of hate. If they don't, Indonesia's pluralism is in increasing peril, which will have grave consequences beyond Southeast Asia.

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