

Indonesia frees ethnic Chinese woman jailed for blasphemy

Meliana, who was sentenced to 18 months in jail for blasphemy, has been released on parole.

By Aisyah Llewellyn

Al Jazeera (23.05.2019) – <https://bit.ly/2wfvGbq>– Meliana, a woman from Indonesia's ethnic Chinese minority sentenced last year to 18 months in prison for blasphemy, has been released on parole.

The 44-year-old, a Buddhist, celebrated her freedom on Tuesday night at a local dim sum restaurant in Medan, the capital of North Sumatra province, with friends and relatives, having spent almost a year behind bars.

"I'm delighted that I could meet my family tonight, with my children and my kind husband who has been so loyal to me and who brought me food in prison every day," she said. The mother of four also thanked the prison staff for treating her well throughout her incarceration.

Meliana was jailed in August 2018 after being found guilty of committing blasphemy over remarks she allegedly made on the volume of the speakers at a mosque near her home in Tanjung

Balai, nearly 200km south of Medan.

A crowd laid siege to Meliana's house and 11 temples were torched after the July 2016 incident was picked up on social media, with some claiming that she had asked for the call to prayer to be stopped – a claim denied by Meliana and her lawyer.

“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,” her lawyer, Ranto Sibarani, had previously told Al Jazeera.

Meiliana said that in her conversation with a neighbour she had only ever remarked that the azan – the Muslim call to prayer – had become a little louder, and had not asked for the volume to be lowered.

She was convicted based on the testimony of several mosque custodians and a local lecturer who came to Meliana's home to confront her about the exchange with her neighbour. In a statement, they claimed that Meliana screamed at them and said the sound of the azan hurt her ears. No recorded evidence of their claims was submitted in court.

An appeal against the conviction, which was criticised by human rights groups, was rejected in April.

‘Very happy’

Under Indonesian law, Meliana was eligible for parole having

served two-thirds of her sentence. She also received remission for Wesak Day, the celebration of Buddha's birthday which is a national holiday in Indonesia. Inmates are usually given sentence reductions around religious celebrations in accordance with their religious beliefs.

While Sibarani, the lawyer, said that he was pleased Meliana had won parole, he also believed that his client should not have spent a single day in prison.

"We are very happy that Meliana's parole request was granted and that Meliana was released on parole today after serving ... a year in prison for a crime we believe that she should never have been sentenced for," he said, adding that he was in the process of deciding whether to file a judicial review to establish his client's innocence.

Indonesia has the world's largest Muslim population, but it is also home to sizeable numbers of Buddhist and Christian minorities. In Tanjung Balai, there are about 11,000 Buddhists out of a population of 185,000.

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, an ethnic Chinese. He was freed from prison earlier this year.

Now that she is a free woman once more, Meliana plans to start a new food business. She said she harboured no animosity

regarding her sentence, despite the fact that her family home was attacked during the rioting and her children threatened. They were rescued from the house by a passing pedicab driver, a Muslim.

“We need to stay united, we need to be good Indonesian citizens,” she said.