

INDONESIA: Transgender Indonesians bear brunt of rising intolerance

The Malay Mail Online (09.10.2016) – <http://bit.ly/2d76vjS> – A handful of Muslim transgender women wash their faces, put on white robes and begin to pray, an act of quiet defiance after their study centre in Indonesia was shut by hardliners.

Al Fatah, which claimed to be the world's only Islamic boarding school for transgender students, was long regarded as a symbol of the tolerant brand of Islam widely practised in the world's most populous Muslim-majority country.

But several months ago, amid a sudden backlash against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, a local hardline group called Islamic Jihad Front forced the school to close.

Despite the risk of retaliation, a small group of former students continue to quietly gather at the school building in the city of Yogyakarta every week to pray and study Islam.

"We want to prove that Islam accepts transgenders, that Islam is a blessing for all mankind," Shinta Ratri, the leader of the prayer group, told AFP.

The closing of the school, which was founded in 2008, is one of the most visible signs of an alarming wave of intolerance sweeping across Yogyakarta – the country's cultural heartland which had long been regarded as an open-minded, accepting city.

In recent times Islamic hardliners have halted a festival focusing on women's issues and have targeted the Christian minority, seeking to close down churches and stop their

community work.

Local police have sometimes been accused of standing back and letting hardliners carry out acts of intolerance, or even of working with them to do so.

'Unity in diversity'

"Unfortunately in recent years, intolerant groups have been imposing their rigid beliefs on people," said Agnes Dwi Rusjiyati, the local coordinator of activist group Bhinneka Tunggal Ika National Alliance.

Bhinneka Tunggal Ika, Indonesia's national motto, means "Unity in Diversity", and is intended to show that the vast archipelago takes strength from the myriad different ethnic, cultural and religious groups living within its borders.

But there has been a growing pushback against this long-cherished belief.

Observers say the trend in Yogyakarta is an acute example of creeping conservatism across the country, that has targeted everything from the gay community, to drinking alcohol and pornography.

The Indonesian constitution officially recognises six different religions. Most of its 255 million inhabitants practise a moderate form of Islam, often infused with influences from local ethnic groups, and no one believes the country is likely to be transformed into a state ruled by sharia law.

But critics say the influence of fringe hardline groups, and the authorities' unwillingness to tackle them for fear of being labelled anti-Islamic, has fuelled a dangerous increase in intolerance.

The targeting of the transgender community around Yogyakarta, who were previously allowed, by and large, to quietly get on

with their lives, stands out as an example of this disturbing trend.

The Al Fatah school, sitting in a labyrinth of alleyways in the historic Kotagede district of Yogyakarta, is a converted house with a main room that has been turned into a place for praying and reciting the Quran.

Three preachers continue to teach about a dozen out of the 42 former students who head there every week since its closure in February.

'Part of God's creation'

"It's so difficult for these transgenders to pray in the mosque because of the stigma," Arif Nuh Safri, a 32-year-old preacher, told AFP.

"So when I came to this school the first thing I told them is they have the right to pray, because they are part of God's creation."

Prior to the closure there had been little sign of resistance to the school in the surrounding area.

"They want to learn to recite the Quran, they want to be good people, and that's better than drinking," said one neighbour, Aris Sutanto.

But Abdurahman, the leader of Islamic Jihad Front, was unapologetic.

"We can't be tolerant towards something that is bad," he said, adding that the hardliners always coordinated with police before taking actions against activities they considered immoral.

Police insisted Yogyakarta was still a tolerant city and said they had only taken action against events when there were objections from people in local neighbourhoods.

Cases of intolerance have escalated in Yogyakarta since 2011, when hardliners began targeting churches. But there has been a sharp increase in recent times as Islamic groups have grown bolder.

In an alarming episode in April, Islamic hardliners and police together allegedly stopped a women's arts festival from going ahead, with organisers claiming they were verbally harassed and some attendees briefly detained by authorities.

The trend has sparked concern among the large community of local artists, who have expressed their frustration in graffiti that questions whether Yogyakarta is still an accepting place, such as: "City of tolerance?".

Ahmad Suaedy, a researcher on Islam appointed by the government as an ombudsman on religious and cultural issues, said the authorities' failure to stop acts of intolerance was causing minorities to suffer.

"This is a political strategy of politicians so they can be seen as taking the middle ground," he said. "But it is at the expense of minority groups."