

Indonesian Buddhist woman's blasphemy conviction upheld

– Supreme Court backs Meiliana's 18-month jail sentence but her lawyer says she is a 'victim of a hoax'.

– by [Aisyah Llewellyn](#)

– Al Jazeera (08.04.2019) – <https://bit.ly/2IjvqiJ-Indonesia>'s Supreme Court has upheld an 18-month jail sentence for a 44-year-old Buddhist woman convicted last year on blasphemy charges.

Meiliana's conviction last August stemmed from a complaint filed after she was accused of making remarks against mosque loudspeakers in the city of Tanjung Balai in North Sumatra nearly three years ago.

Her lawyer Ranto Sibarani said that his client was a "victim of a hoax," denying she made those remarks.

"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," Sibarani told Al Jazeera.

"Today's decision is very dangerous because in the future it means that people can spread false information which will lead to wrongful convictions under the blasphemy law."

The case is based on an incident on July 22, 2016 when Meiliana, an ethnic Chinese-Buddhist resident of Medan, purportedly made a complaint to her neighbour, Kasini, who like many Indonesians only goes by one name.

Kasini claimed that Meiliana asked for the azan, the Islamic call to prayer, to be turned down at the local al-Mashum

mosque. Her version has been disputed and the ensuing blasphemy conviction widely criticised by [human rights](#) groups, including [Amnesty International](#) Indonesia.

In the days and weeks that followed the initial incident, comments were widely shared on [social media](#) stating that Meiliana, a mother of four, had tried to stop the mosque from broadcasting the call to prayer.

A mob in Tanjung Balai set fire to Meiliana's front lawn while two of her four children were inside her home. They escaped with the help of a Muslim pedicab driver who happened to be passing at the time.

Members of the mob were then called as witnesses at the trial which took place in Medan District Court between June and August last year.

Sibarani said there was insufficient evidence against Meiliana to warrant a custodial sentence.

"The hoax was legitimised by the court. The judge allowed a statement letter to be submitted as evidence by three witnesses outside Meiliana's house," he said.

"They claimed she told them the prayer call hurt her ears while a gang confronted her and pelted her home with rocks and bottles. Yet there is no evidence that this conversation ever happened and the statement letter was written six months after the incident."

Indonesia has the world's largest Muslim population but it also is home to sizeable numbers of Buddhist and Christian minorities.

The alleged remarks also kicked off some of the worst race riots since the fall of Suharto in 1998. At least 11 Buddhist temples were torched in Tanjung Balai, where Buddhists number around 11,000 out of 185,000 residents.

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.

Ahok was sentenced to two years in prison for insulting Islam following comments he made about a verse from the Quran in 2016.

According to Sibarani, Meiliana's legal team are now considering their final legal options.

"We believe that video evidence of the discussion outside Meiliana's home exists and we plan to use it to file a judicial review," he said. "If this case is not followed up then it means that anyone can now file a statement letter to a judge accusing someone of blasphemy without having to prove it."

"This case shows that there is no legal certainty in Indonesia any more."