

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.

Mr. Rogers is East Asia Team Leader at the international human-rights organization CSW and author of “Indonesia: Pluralism in Peril—the Rise of Religious Intolerance Across the Archipelago” (2014).

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CHINA: An open letter to Pope Francis on China

By Benedict Rogers

Huffpost Politics (07.11.2016) – <http://huff.to/2fFI7Tl> –

Dear Holy Father,

Like every true Catholic in the world, I love you and respect your authority as the Successor of St Peter.

Like a great many people in the world, well beyond the Catholic Church, I recognise the beautiful message you, as Pope Francis, bring to the world.

And as a new Catholic who came into the Church little over ten days after your election to the papacy, my Catholic faith is inspired and intertwined with your pontificate.

I became a Catholic on Palm Sunday, 2013, received into the Church by Burma's first-ever Cardinal Charles Maung Bo. Although I am British, I became a Catholic in an Asian country emerging from dictatorship, inspired by a Church that has endured decades of persecution. I have also lived in China and Hong Kong, and have come to know and love Cardinal Joseph Zen, whose story is told, along with my other heroes, in my book *From Burma to Rome*, which I had the privilege of presenting to you when we met in August.

For all these reasons – because I love you, Holy Father, because I love the Church, because I love the people of China and Asia, because I love Cardinal Zen, and most of all because I love God and our Lord Jesus Christ – I humbly appeal to you to reconsider your proposed agreement with the Communist regime in China: before it is too late.

Over the past three years, the human rights situation in China has deteriorated dramatically. Hundreds of human rights lawyers, many of them Christians, have been detained, simply for defending freedom of religion and freedom of conscience cases. Thousands of Christian crosses have been destroyed. Many Christian clergy, Catholic and Protestant, remain in jail or harassed. Tibetan Buddhists, Uighur Muslims and Falun Gong practitioners continue to be persecuted. Allegations of forced organ harvesting – targeting prisoners of conscience – persist. Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Liu Xiaobo remains in

jail. Hong Kong's freedoms are now in at tatters.

Earlier this year, the Conservative Party Human Rights Commission in the United Kingdom published an in-depth report, *The Darkest Moment: The Crackdown on Human Rights in China 2013-2016*. It was launched by the former Governor of Hong Kong Lord Patten, himself a Catholic, in June, and includes testimonies from Hong Kong democrats Martin Lee and Anson Chan, both Catholics.

Holy Father, you will be well aware of the arguments made by Cardinal Zen, which I need not repeat. I simply say that at this time, human rights are deteriorating drastically in China and I don't believe it is the time to compromise. At a time when religious freedom overall in China is being further restricted, when other religions are being severely persecuted, when organs may be being harvested, when lawyers are being harassed, when freedom of expression is being denied, now is not the time to seek a special arrangement for the Catholic Church. Now is not the time to kowtow.

Furthermore, while I am a very new Catholic, and so I write with all appropriate humility, two of the things that attracted me into the Church are the Church's commitment to justice and human rights, as set out in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, and the Apostolic Succession. That means the Church must take a stand against Xi Jinping's brutality as it did against Caesar's, Stalin's and Hitler's. And it means that it cannot settle for anything less than complete Papal authority over episcopal and priestly appointments in China. I don't know what deal might be about to be agreed, but I find it hard to imagine Beijing agreeing to this. If it does, then I welcome it. But if not, I urge you

to reject the deal. How can bishops appointed by a communist, corrupt, cruel and brutal regime be acceptable to the Church founded by Jesus Christ?

Instead of compromise with Beijing, I urge you – Holy Father – to follow in the footsteps of the Apostles, and lead a revolution for peaceful change in China.

With humble, sincere prayers from a relatively new Catholic,

Benedict Rogers