

Pluralism in Indonesia is Imperilled, says Interfaith Delegation

An interfaith delegation from Indonesia was in Brussels this week to highlight the launch of a new report by Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), *Indonesia: Pluralism in Peril – The rise of religious intolerance across the archipelago*. On 3rd March, the group met with a gathering of NGO leaders at the Austrian Permanent Representation. Benedict Rogers, CSW East Asia Team Leader and the chief author of the report, spoke of the 'increasing mainstreaming of intolerance' that has affected Indonesia's religious minorities in recent years. Rogers noted that the situation is worsening and becoming more widespread.

Religious intolerance has been fuelled by government policies, new discriminatory legislation and the current administration's failure to uphold the rule of law. President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, who came to power in 2004, has been noted for his inflammatory rhetoric and concessions to Islamist groups and political parties.

A climate of intolerance and violence toward religious minorities, previously limited to certain pockets of conservatism, has now become more pervasive throughout Indonesia, said Rogers. He added, however, that it is still not too late for the country to recover its tradition of respect and pluralism. This tradition is 'imperilled but not destroyed,' he remarked.

Human Rights Without Frontiers highlighted Indonesia as a 'country of particular concern' in its 2013 World Report on the Freedom of Religion or Belief.

The delegation included The Reverend Favor Bancin from the Communion of Churches in Indonesia; Dr Ahmad Suaedy, Executive Director of the Abdurrahman Wahid Centre for Inter-Faith Dialogue at the University of Indonesia; Father Benny Susetyo from the Catholic Bishops Conference; Ms Muliathy Briany, a Christian teacher who previously worked for Scripture Union Indonesia; Mahmud Mubarik Ahmad, Secretary of Isyaat, a publication produced by the Ahmadiyya Muslim community in Indonesia; and Ahmad Hidayat, General Secretary of the Central Council of Ahlulbait Indonesia and representing the Shi'a Muslim community.

On 4th March, the delegation participated in a hearing at the European Parliament on the topic, sponsored by MEP Hannu Takkula. Speakers repeated their caution that violations of freedom of religion or belief pose a threat to Indonesia's values of pluralism.

During the hearing, participants were scandalised by the embarrassingly denialist remarks of the Indonesian Ambassador to the European Union, Mr Arif Havas Oegroseno.

Mr Havas warned against putting faith in 'inconclusive reports' which contain 'strategic deficiencies,' referring to the new CSW publication. He went on to suggest that Indonesia and the EU work together on interreligious matters, since both face similar challenges of multiculturalism and managing pluralism.

Regrettably, throughout Mr Rogers' response to these allegations, Ambassador Havas engaged in frivolous conversation with his neighbour in an obvious display of contempt for his interlocutor. The conclusion drawn from such behaviour was not lost on the many observers in the room: if this is how a high-ranking official addresses painful incidents of intolerance and violence in his own country, there is little wonder that President Yudhoyono's government faces a widening credibility gap at home and abroad.