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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**



Sibarani said there was insufficient evidence against Meiliana to warrant a custodial sentence [Antara Foto/Irsan Mulyadi via Reuters]

Al Jazeera (08.04.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2IjvqjJ> - [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."

Ahok: Former Jakarta governor released early from prison

The former governor of the Indonesian capital, Jakarta, has been released early from his jail term for blasphemy.

BBC (24.01.2019) - <https://bbc.in/2HtxsxV> - Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, known as Ahok, is a Christian and was Jakarta's first non-Muslim governor in 50 years.

But he was convicted of blasphemy in 2017 in a case seen as a test of religious tolerance in the Muslim-majority country.

His case sparked protests in support and condemnation of a politician once tipped for the presidency.

Mr Purnama was released early - for good behaviour - on Thursday morning after serving 20 months of a two-year sentence.

He was greeted by supporters who had gathered outside the detention centre in the hope of meeting him.

"My heart told me I had to be here," supporter Heni told the BBC. "I am overjoyed that he is free. I feel like a weight has been lifted from all of us."

Singing songs, some people broke down in tears on hearing the news that he was free.

The politician's eldest son posted a photo of himself with his father on Instagram with the message: "He is back! My dad is free! Thanks everyone for the support."

Blasphemy accusations

Ahok was accused of blasphemy over comments he made during a pre-election campaign in September 2016.

In a speech, he implied that Islamic leaders were trying to trick voters by using a verse in the Koran to argue that Muslims should not vote for a non-Muslim leader.

An edited video of his remarks was widely shared online. It sparked outrage among religious hard-liners who staged regular large rallies calling for him to face trial.

"His prosecution will not be forgotten"

Rebecca Henschke, BBC Indonesia correspondent

In his last public letter from jail, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama made it clear he wanted to start a new chapter in his life. He asked his supporters to now call him by his initials BTP instead of Ahok.

He said he was grateful to God for the time he spent in jail and that if he had stayed in power he would have been "more arrogant, ruder" and hurt more people.

There is now talk of him going on an international speaking tour, creating a YouTube channel and getting married.

But his prosecution will not be forgotten. It changed Indonesia and has had lasting political and social impacts.

It sent a clear message that freedoms of expression and religion in Indonesia are tenuous. And has made it harder for non-Muslims to rise to positions of power in this multi-faith county.

Throughout the trial, Mr Purnama denied wrongdoing, but did apologise for his comments.

The eventual verdict had been met with strong protest. Hard-line Islamic groups who called for the maximum penalty of five years said it was too lenient, but Mr Purnama's supporters said it was too harsh and that he should be acquitted.

Anti-corruption stance

During his term as Jakarta governor from 2014 to 2017, Mr Purnama was known as a straight-talking technocrat.

His policies included the setting of minimum wages, calling for free school education and healthcare, reducing traffic congestion and tackling corruption among government officials.

These policies, along with his strong anti-corruption stance, made him very popular in Indonesia and he was tipped as a possible future president.

But in May 2017 he lost the governorship to conservative Muslim candidate Anies Rasyid Baswedan.

Mr Purnama's subsequent imprisonment deeply divided the nation.

"This ruling is sending a clear message to the minorities that they can't play around with the majority or this is what will happen to you," Bivitri Susanti, one of the founders of the Centre of Study for Law and Policy, told the BBC at the time.

Jakarta is a melting pot of many ethnic groups. Despite being a majority Muslim country, Indonesia has a pluralist and multi-faith constitution that recognises six official religions.