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Call to end bias against traditional faiths

Despite a ruling from the Constitutional Court, followers of indigenous faiths still lack full recognition from the state

By Katharina Reny Lestari

UCA News (22.11.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3XBn4qG> - Religious leaders in [Indonesia](#) have urged the government and society to bring an end to what they call various forms of discrimination against followers of traditional faiths in the Muslim-majority Southeast Asian nation.

"The root of the problem is clear enough, which is the lack of the state's full recognition of traditional faiths that traditional faiths are real, and their followers live in the society. It is an irony in a nation that promotes religious tolerance and harmony," reads a statement from an interfaith gathering held Nov. 16-19 at Cigugur of Kuningan district in West Java province.

The *Maklumat Cigugur* (Cigugur Declaration) resulted from the gathering that drew leaders from Buddhism, Catholicism, Hinduism, Islam, and Protestantism as well as traditional faiths. It was organized by the Communion of Churches in Indonesia (PGI), the country's largest inter-church forum.

The declaration decried that "intolerance and discrimination are still systematically faced by followers of traditional faiths."

The faith leaders urged the government to end all acts hindering public services to followers of traditional faiths and encouraged social elements to uphold the values of humanity and national unity.

Followers of traditional faiths say they continue to face discrimination in the country.

Engkus Ruswana, a follower of *BudiDaya*, a traditional Sundanese faith and coordinator of the Indonesian Native Faiths Council, told UCA News on Nov. 21 that in October he came to know about the ordeal faced by a 20-year-old follower of the indigenous faith, Marapu.

The parents of the boy were forced to list themselves as Protestants in the religion column in the family certificate and identity cards before he was admitted to a school on Sumba Island in Christian-majority East Nusa Tenggara province.

The school required 'a baptism certificate' for admission, which the parents didn't have.

The boy faced a similar situation when he applied for an identity card, he said.

Indonesia officially recognizes six religions – Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Hinduism.

Ruswana said that the boy was aware that a ruling by the Constitutional Court declared unconstitutional the 2013 Civil Administration Law and paved the way for followers of traditional faiths to have their beliefs officially recognized by the government.

"So, he wanted to replace 'Protestantism' on the religion column of his identity card with *Kepercayaan terhadap Tuhan Yang Maha Esa* (trust in God Almighty). But he could not do that as he was told his parents are still listed as Protestants. He must follow his parents," he said.

According to the law, identity cards should include elements of citizens' data including religion, and the religion column should be left blank for citizens whose religions are not yet recognized and for followers of traditional beliefs.

Followers of four traditional faiths filed for a judicial review in 2016, arguing that the law violated the principle of equality before the law. The court said articles in the law that required people adopting traditional faiths to leave the religion column in their identity cards blank were discriminatory.

After consultations with various religious leaders, the government decided that the religion column on identity cards for traditional faith followers would be replaced with a traditional faith column without listing the faith's specific name. Instead, it would have the phrase, trust in God Almighty.

There are 187 traditional faiths in Indonesia with about 12 million followers.

Iwan Setiawan, 40, a follower of the indigenous faith Kapribaden, from Jakarta claimed that he has not yet received his identity card with the sanctioned phrase written in the religion column though he submitted the application in 2019.

"I checked with local authorities this year. But they said it is not ready yet. One even told me that there are only six recognized religions. They do not really understand about the latest policy or what?" he told UCA News.

Nilna Rusyda, a Muslim from the Kuningan chapter of the Interfaith Women Network, said Muslims do not have any objection toward full recognition of traditional faiths.

"We respect them. Even though we adhere to different faiths, we have the same rights as citizens. Let us be united in kindness," she told UCA News.

Reverend Jimmy Sormin, executive secretary of the PGI's Witness and Integrity of Creation Desk, said that PGI has made freedom of religion a major priority since 2019.

"PGI needs to respond to the issue of freedom of religion. It is because there are still challenges particularly faced by followers of traditional faiths," he told UCA News.

"What we have done so far is we invited all members of PGI to transform our mission: how we proclaim the Gospel for the sake of justice for all people whose rights are not fully recognized yet," he said.

Photo: In this photo taken in August 2016, women followers of some of Indonesia's traditional beliefs and indigenous faiths, offer prayers during a recent gathering in Jakarta. (Photo: Katharina R. Lestari)

Religious freedom issues raised at the UN in Geneva

HRWF (15.11.2022) - On 9 November, Indonesia's human rights report was reviewed in the framework of the UN Universal Periodic Review (UPR) in Geneva. The issue of religious freedom was particularly raised by [Christian Solidarity Worldwide](#) in a submission filed ahead of the UPR process. Here is an excerpt of it:

Rising religious intolerance

23. While Indonesia's tradition of religious pluralism does have limitations which should be addressed, including the lack of protection for adherents of religions outside the six religions recognised by the constitution and for those of other beliefs, it was designed to protect pluralism in a Muslim-majority nation.
24. Rising religious intolerance, however, threatens to destroy these achievements and poses a threat not only to the country's religious minorities, but to all Indonesians who value democracy, human rights, peace and stability.
25. There has also been a decline in state-sponsored violations of FoRB. However, there continues to be growing religious intolerance in society, as evidenced by the instrumentalization of religion in the 2019 elections.

Attacks on religious minorities

26. Incidents of violence against religious minorities, particularly Christians, Ahmadiyyas, Shi'as and adherents of religions or beliefs not recognised by the state, including indigenous traditional beliefs, continue periodically within a climate of impunity.
27. In September 2020, UCA News reported that Reverend Yeremia Zanambani, a Protestant pastor and Bible translator, had been shot dead in Indonesia's restive Papua region.⁴ There was some dispute over whether he had been killed by the Indonesian military or by members of a local separatist group, however in October 2020 Indonesia's human rights commission (Komnas HAM) reported that a fact-

finding team believed Pastor Zanambani had been tortured and killed by the military, who were hoping to extract information on stolen military weapons.⁵

28. On 30 November 2020, IS-linked Islamic militants carried out an attack on a Salvation Army outpost in Lemban Tongoa village in Indonesia's Central Sulawesi province. Four people were killed, one of whom was beheaded, and several homes were burnt down, including a house used for prayers.

Attacks on places of worship

29. Various places of worship have been attacked during the reporting period, including Christian churches, Ahmadiyya mosques and Buddhist temples.
30. One of the darkest days for religious minorities in the country occurred on 13 May 2018 when three churches in Surabaya, Indonesia's second largest city, were attacked within minutes of each other by a family of suicide bombers. Three individuals received prison sentences for their suspected involvement in the bombing in March 2019.
31. On Palm Sunday, 28 March 2021, suicide bombers attacked a Catholic Church in Makassar, South Sulawesi, leaving at least 14 people injured.⁶
32. In March 2020, 15 Indonesians filed a lawsuit with the Supreme Court arguing that the closure of thousands of places of worship was being done under a discriminatory law, the 2006 Religious Harmony regulation.⁷

Ahmadiyya Muslim community

33. The Ahmadiyya Muslim community has existed in Indonesia since 1925, and claims a population of approximately 500,000 across 330 branches throughout the country. The Ahmadiyya consider themselves to be Muslims but are regarded by some other Muslims as heretical.
34. Since 2005, the community has experienced serious violations of FoRB, including incidents of violence. A Joint Ministerial Decree introduced in 2008 by the Minister of Religious Affairs, the Attorney General and the Minister of Home Affairs prohibited promulgation of Ahmadiyya teachings. In 2011, the then Minister of Religious Affairs repeatedly called for an outright ban on the Ahmadiyya, and in 2013 the governor of West Java said that there would be no violence against the Ahmadiyya if there were no Ahmadiyya teachings or practices, describing Ahmadiyya Islam as "a deviant belief." The "problem," he added, "will disappear if the belief disappears."
35. Although there has been, according to Ahmadi representatives, "some improvement" under the government of President Joko Widodo, intimidation of the Ahmadiyya continues and Ahmadiyya activities continue to be restricted to date.
36. On 14 January 2022, UCA News reported that a district chief in Indonesia's West Kalimantan province ordered the demolition of an Ahmadi mosque that had been damaged in a September 2021 attack by Muslim extremists.⁸ The order was issued days after the perpetrators of the attack were jailed for four months.

Footnotes

⁴ UCANews, 'Protestant Pastor shot dead in Indonesia, 21 September 2020 <https://www.ucanews.com/news/protestant-pastor-shot-dead-in-indonesia/89597>

⁵ CNN Indonesia, 'Investigasi Tim Kemanusiaan: Pendeta Yeremia Ditembak TNI', 30 October 2020 <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20201029125036-20-563926/investigasi-tim-kemanusiaan-pendeta-yeremia-ditembak-tni>

⁶ BBC, 'Indonesia bombing: Worshippers wounded in Makassar church attack', 28 March 2021, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-56553790>

⁷ Twitter, tweet by Andreas Harsono, 5 March 2020, <https://twitter.com/andreasharsono/status/1235707989459337216> ⁸ UCANews, 'Indonesian district to demolish Ahmadi house of worship', 14 January 2022 <https://www.ucanews.com/news/indonesian-district-to-demolish-ahmadi-house-of-worship/95731>

Hijab rules are raising rights concerns

UCA News (05.08.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3bEyNSB> - A recent case of forcing a student to wear a hijab at a state school has renewed concerns about a "rights violation" in Indonesia, which also targets religious minorities, according to rights activists.

The Muslim-majority country was shocked last week by the case of a Muslim student at a senior high school in Banguntapan, Bantul district, Yogyakarta special region who claimed to be intimidated by teachers into wearing a headscarf.

As a result, the 16-year-old student was reported to have confined herself for an hour in a school toilet.

The school later denied any coercion, but the "traumatized" girl reportedly moved to another school.

The case sparked criticism from rights groups against the practice of coercion, which has also been experienced by religious minorities across the country.

Andreas Harsono, the Indonesia researcher for New York-based Human Rights Watch (HRW), said cases of forced wearing of the hijab will continue because there are still regulations that require the hijab, although efforts have already begun to change it.

"There are still at least 60 regulations in the regions, from the districts, cities and provincial levels to national ones, complete with sanctions," he told UCA News on Aug. 2.

He said the regulations were generally coercive.

"Because there is a system of coercion mixed with reasons for religious beliefs, there is a practice of supervising each other, becoming a kind of police force for others who don't obey it," he said.

He said recent HRW research found that such regulations, which were introduced in 2001 in a number of Muslim-majority provinces such as West Java, Aceh and West Sumatra, had an impact such as widespread bullying of girls and women to force them to wear the hijab, as well as the deep psychological distress the bullying can cause.

The victims, he said, included non-Muslims.

"We found coercion against non-Muslims in 24 provinces to varying degrees, from Christianity, Buddhism, Confucianism, as well as from other religions," he said.

He said victims who did not comply were forced to leave school or withdrew under pressure, while some female civil servants, including teachers, doctors, school principals and university lecturers, lost their jobs or felt compelled to resign.

He said the government had taken steps to end this practice, citing a move by Education and Culture Minister Nadiem Makarim and two other ministers in February 2021 who amended the 2014 regulation to specify that schoolgirls are free to choose whether to wear the hijab.

However, he said, in May 2021, the Supreme Court struck down that amendment to the regulation, effectively ruling that girls under 18 have no right to choose their own clothes.

The court said the amendment contravened existing laws on the jurisdiction of local governments, child protection and the national education system.

"The ruling ended government efforts to give Muslim girls and teachers the freedom to choose what they wear," he said.

"As long as there is no attempt to correct the existing regulations, we can be sure that in the future, coercive efforts will reappear," he said.

Meanwhile, Halili Hasan, a researcher from the Setara Institute for Democracy and Peace, said forcing the wearing of the hijab, including in schools "is contrary to the diversity of Indonesia, which we must uphold, maintain and strengthen."

He said stakeholders in schools "should be key actors for educational and civilizing processes in schools that are principally oriented to the interests of students, non-violence (from symbolic, verbal to open acts of violence), and a culture of peace."

"The act of forcing the wearing of the headscarf that traumatized students is clearly against these principles," he said.

Photo: A woman wearing a hijab – UCA News

Clerical body 'sorry' for false apostasy claims

North Sumatra branch of Ulema Council sparks row after official said conversions were rampant in local district

By Katharina R. Lestari

UCA News (17.05.2022)- <https://bit.ly/3Pv35Gn> - A provincial branch of Indonesia's highest Muslim clerical body was forced to apologize on May 17 after coming under fire from local authorities and Christians for indirectly accusing religious minorities of apostasy.

The row began several days earlier when the North Sumatra branch of the Ulema Council claimed that a district in the province had a very alarming rate of apostasy cases.

Muhammad Hatta, who heads the council's local religious propagation desk, said over the weekend that he was informed about a large number of Muslims abandoning their faith in Langkat district.

Despite a lack of concrete data confirming this, he claimed that "it was very alarming."

According to him, there were attempts to convert local Muslims to other faiths through marriage and other methods.

"Sometimes a couple professing Islam and another religion get married the Islamic way but after the Muslim is forced to adhere to his or her partner's religion," Indonesian language news portal detick.com quoted him as saying.

He pointed to a case in which a 30-year-old Muslim woman was allegedly forced to convert to Christianity after marrying a Protestant man in the district.

However, his claims were fiercely denied by a local official and a Catholic Church leader.

The acting district head, Syah Afandin, acknowledged a Muslim woman had converted to Christianity but asserted that "she was the only one" and "there are no attempts at organized apostasy."

He said Hatta's remarks were very inflammatory, "because what really happened was that the Muslim woman dated the Christian man, left her parent's home for six months to be with him, converted to Christianity, and was married to him by a Protestant pastor."

He also said the Muslim woman's parents had filed a police report which was rejected as they had no authority to deal with the case.

Speaking with UCA News on May 17, Reverend Ahmad Sajli DK Pinem, general secretary of the North Sumatra chapter of the Communion of Churches in Indonesia, criticized the said the local Ulema council claim was blown out of proportion.

Commenting on the conversion of the Muslim woman he said: "Conversion is a personal affair. It has nothing to do with others."

He said the woman's family might be disappointed with her decision. "Or perhaps they want something else. I do not know."

He also called on Christians in the district not to be provoked by the Ulema Council's claim about large-scale conversions he said.

The North Sumatra chapter of the MUI finally issued a clarification on May 17 following the criticisms.

Its chairman, Zulkifli Ahmad Dian, apologized for the confusion and said the district had in fact recorded no mass apostasy attempts.

Photo: An official at the North Sumatra branch of Indonesia's Ulema Council claimed many Muslims were being converted to other religions through marriage. (Unsplash)

Police in Indonesia's West Java charge man with blasphemy for desecrating Quran

Iqna (07.05.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3FH5pFE> - Cepdika Eka Rismana, 25, a resident of Sukabumi city in West Java, was arrested at a restaurant in the city on May 5, police said. He was then charged with blasphemy.

The arrest came after a Muslim group in the province held a protest rally in front of Eka's parental house in Cianjur and his own house in Sukabumi. They were enraged after a video went viral on social media that showed Eka trampling on a Quran.

"I am Dika Eka consciously, I challenge all Muslims," Eka said on the video while committing the act.

Police also arrested Eka's wife on May 5 and named her as a suspect. She is accused of uploading the video on her Facebook, Instagram and Twitter profiles.

If found guilty, the couple could be jailed up to six years under Indonesian criminal law.

Eka and his wife are Muslims but Eka claimed he has converted to another religion without naming it.

West Java police spokesman Ibrahim Tompo confirmed the arrests. "Eka and his wife have been arrested and now they are detained at the police station for interrogation," Tompo said on May 5.

Tompo said Eka had committed the act in 2020 and the video was saved on his mobile phone.

"It was uploaded by his wife on social media after the couple had a quarrel in April this year, so his wife was also arrested and named as a suspect," he said.

The Indonesian Ulema Council, the country's leading Islamic scholars' body, called on Muslims to remain calm and refrain from vigilante attacks.

"Let the police handle the perpetrator legally," Muhammad Cholil Nafis, the council's chairman, said on May 6. "I call upon Muslims to remain calm and not to get provoked over the incident."

Father Antonius Benny Susetyo, a member of a presidential unit promoting communal tolerance, applauded the police for the quick arrests that prevented possible anarchy over the incident.

The priest said such offensive acts should be handled properly to stop possible conflict that can destroy unity and harmony.

“All blasphemy cases should be processed fairly. Don’t let this cause conflict that can damage the unity of people and destroy the nation,” Father Susetyo told UCA News.

The priest said people of all religions need to respect each other to prevent blasphemy and insisted the law must allowed to take its course to deal with the perpetrators.

Indonesia has seen a series of blasphemy cases in recent times.

On April 9, a court in West Java sentenced Christian YouTuber Muhammad Kace to 10 years in jail. Kace, a Muslim convert, was accused of insulting Islam and Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in a video posted on YouTube.

Police are also hunting Christian pastor Abraham Ben Moses, who has been accused of blasphemy after he urged Religious Affairs Minister Yaqut Cholil Qoumas to remove 300 verses from the Quran.

Moses, 57, has reportedly fled to the United States to avoid arrest.

Photo: ucanews.com

Christian YouTuber sentenced to 10 years in prison for posting videos critical of Islam

By Anugrah Kumar

The Christian Post (09.04.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3vfYrmq> - An Indonesian Christian YouTuber has been sentenced to 10 years in prison for posting a video that purportedly offended people across the Muslim-majority country.

Muhammad Kace, a former Muslim cleric who converted to Christianity in 2014 and had been uploading videos to YouTube criticizing his former faith, was sentenced to 10 years in prison by the Ciamis District Court in West Java this week.

On the day of his sentencing, Muslims surrounded the court demanding a harsher prosecution of the convert, according to the U.S.-based persecution watchdog [International Christian Concern](#).

Kace was arrested in Bali last August after he uploaded a sermon video in which he allegedly insulted the Islamic prophet Muhammad. According to [UCA News](#), Muslim groups filed several complaints about that video in which he said: “Muhammad is unknown by God and is only known by his followers because he is surrounded by devils.” When prosecutors demanded a 10-year jail term for him, Bonar Tigor Naipospos, deputy chairman of the Jakarta-based rights group Setara Institute for Democracy and Peace, noted that Muhammad Yahya Waloni, a Muslim convert from Christianity, was recently [convicted](#) of a similar offense against Christians but he received only five months.

Police allege that Kace uploaded at least 400 videos insulting Islam. And he did it intentionally to stir public unrest, chief prosecutor Syahnun Tanjung was quoted as telling the court. "This is outrageous, so it warrants a stiff sentence," he said.

In jail, Kace was beaten and tortured by a police official named Napoleon Bonaparte, who was detained in the same prison due to a corruption case, ICC said, adding that Bonaparte forced Kace to eat his excrement.

Kace's lawyer, Martin Lucas Simanjuntak, has said his client will appeal the sentence. Andreas Harsono, a senior researcher for Human Rights Watch Indonesia, told ICC. "Both Christian preacher Mohammad Kace and Muslim cleric Yahya Waloni need not to stay a single night in prison because of the toxic law."

Timothy Carothers, ICC's advocacy manager for Southeast Asia, said: "The right to speak one's mind is essential and must be protected. This sort of treatment and punishment under Indonesian law is a shameful reality. As long as Indonesia continues to enforce religious harmony through regulation and prosecution, it will continue to achieve the opposite."

The Southeast Asian country is home to the world's largest Muslim population. Its Constitution is based on the doctrine of Pancasila — five principles upholding the nation's belief in the one and only God and social justice, humanity, unity and democracy for all. However, there are many extremist groups in Indonesia that oppose Pancasila. Churches often face opposition from groups that attempt to obstruct the construction of non-Muslim houses of worship.

Photo : Christians gather at a church for Easter mass on April 4, 2021, in Surabaya amid tight police security following the March 28 a bombing at the Makassar cathedral on Palm Sunday. | JUNI KRISWANTO/AFP via Getty Images

Discrimination holds back religious minority children

By Andreas Harsono, Indonesia Research

Human Rights Watch (14.01.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3g2fZLq> - In December 2021, I had the chance to talk with a bright 14-year-old girl named Maria Tunbonat, a fifth-grader in a state school in Tarakan, North Kalimantan. Her father, Ayub, also joined the video call as we spoke about her school and her hobbies.

Maria has been a fifth-grader for three years because her teachers refuse to let her move on to the next grade. The reason? Maria and her family are Jehovah's Witnesses.

Jehovah's Witnesses originated in the United States during the 19th century but have since expanded worldwide. Now they have 510 congregations in Indonesia. The group said it had [8.7 million Jehovah's Witnesses worldwide in 2021](#).

Jehovah's Witnesses have specific views on key Christian theological issues that make them unpopular with some members of the Christian establishment in Indonesia and elsewhere in the world. Jehovah's Witnesses were [banned in Indonesia between 1976 and 2001](#). In 2002, the Religious Affairs Ministry allowed them to register in Indonesia.

In November 2021, the National Commission for Child Protection revealed that [Maria and her two younger brothers at SDN 51 state elementary school in Tarakan had been denied a passing grade since 2019](#) despite their excellent academic records.

Ayub told me that he, his wife and children, Maria, Yosua (grade 4), and Yonatan (grade 2) had converted to become Jehovah's Witnesses in November 2018. It seemed like a simple conversion, but teachers at the local school disapproved, saying the children were "deviating from Christian teachings".

In 2019, the school expelled them, saying the three siblings had refused to sing the Indonesian national anthem, *Indonesia Raya*. The siblings had joined school assemblies and stood with respect but refused to sing and salute the national flag in accordance with Jehovah's Witnesses' beliefs.

"We do [not](#) venerate the cross or any other images," the group's website says.

Ayub filed a lawsuit against the school at the Samarinda State Administrative Court, saying that his children only "saluted God" but neither disrespected the anthem nor the flag. In September 2020, the Indonesian court ruled in favor of the children, allowing them to resume schooling after months of absence.

The siblings stayed in their same grades in 2020. According to the school principal, FX Hasto Budi, SDN 51 has 158 Muslim students, two Catholics and four Protestants, including the siblings. The school has a part-time teacher to teach Christianity classes, and Ayub agreed to enroll his children in those classes. In Indonesia, students take mandatory religious instruction based on their religion.

When I spoke to Budi, he told me that the three siblings had refused to sing "certain Christian songs" and thus the school failed them in their religion classes. Budi decided to hold them back from moving up to the next grade in 2022.

Indonesia's 1965 blasphemy law "recognizes" only six religions: Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism. Budi said he would allow the three children to advance in grades if the government changed the law to recognize Jehovah's Witnesses.

"If the Jehovah's Witnesses claims to be under Christianity, then they must obey the guidelines from the Christian church," he said. "The Religious Affairs Ministry has a legal explanation about Christian education."

But this is a misreading of the blasphemy law. The explanation attached to the law states that despite "protecting" the six religions from defamation, Indonesia still allows other religions and beliefs to be practiced in Indonesia. President Sukarno, who wrote the law in January 1965, explicitly mentioned that "Judaism, Zoroastrian, Shinto, Taoism and others" could be practiced.

The 2014 Children Protection Law also says that all children have the right to practice their religions and beliefs. Article 21 says the state, the central government and local governments are obligated and responsible for fulfilling the rights of children without discrimination, including on the basis of religion.

Denying elementary students and advancement to the next grade because of their faith violates their rights to education and freedom of worship. The principal could simply ask the students to take Jehovah's Witnesses lessons from their community in Tarakan, like [Sunda Wiwitan students in West Java have done](#), or offer another accommodation at the school.

Ario Sulistiono of the [Jehovah's Witnesses office in Jakarta](#) told me that a total of 22 children have faced similar problems elsewhere in Indonesia since 2016. In most cases, parents decided to move their children to other schools that did not discriminate against them in this way. But this is an unacceptable price to pay for one's religious beliefs. The Tarakan authorities should direct the principal to promote the siblings to their proper grade level immediately. The Education, Culture, Research and Technology Ministry should issue national instructions prohibiting such discrimination.

As I was saying goodbye, Maria asked me what she should spend time learning, as repeating her grade has left her with a lot of time. I suggested she study English, as it will open up a world of information and ideas.

Photo: Members of the National Commission for Child Protection speak with students at SDN 51 state elementary school, including Maria Tunbonat and her siblings in Tarakan, North Kalimantan, Indonesia, November 2021. © Photo courtesy of Retno Listyarti of the National Commission for Child Protection