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Indonesia to relax building rules for worship places

Obtaining permission to build a church is difficult in the most populous Muslim-majority country

[UCA News](#) (08.06.2023) - The Indonesian government has decided to ease rules for building houses of worship, including churches, by initiating changes to a 17-year-old decree, considered a major barrier to such plans.

Religion Affairs Minister Yaqut Cholil Qoumas told lawmakers on June 5 that the Joint Ministerial Decree of 2006 will be revised, doing away with the need for a recommendation from the Forums for Religious Harmony (Forum Kerukunan Umat Beragama, or FKUB), the main arbiter on issues regarding interfaith ties.

According to current rules, a government license for building a place of worship can be obtained only by getting a set of recommendations, including one from the Muslim-dominated FKUB.

The change would mean the recommendation from representatives of the ministry in the local government would be sufficient to construct a house of worship.

"Often, the more recommendations the more difficult it is," said the minister, who is a cleric and member of Indonesia's largest moderate Islamic organization Nahdlatul Ulama.

"We can't deny that," the minister said of many proposals new houses of worship are rejected in the country.

"We can solve all problems if we start with honesty, especially being honest with our religion," said the Muslim politician.

Andreas Harsono, a researcher from Human Rights Watch, said that "by removing permits for houses of worship from FKUB, the government is actually returning the principle of freedom of religion, according to the 1945 Constitution, to Indonesia."

He said the FKUB founded in 2006 has been problematic.

"In the name of harmony, the minority submits to the majority. This is different from the concept of freedom of religion where all citizens have the same right to practice their faith, regardless of religion or belief," Harsono said.

Also, being representative of the population, the forum always had more Muslim members.

"In [Jakarta](#), 83 percent of the 21 FKUB members are Muslim. As a result, the decisions taken by the forum reflect a majority veto," he said.

Harsono said that since 2006, thousands of houses of worship for minority groups have been closed.

Most of them are churches because Christians are the largest minority in Indonesia, and not surprisingly, the number of mosques has increased dramatically.

"Based on data from several different institutions, I estimate that at least 1,000 churches were closed or plans for their renovations were canceled.

However, the number of mosques increased from 243,000 in 2010 to 550,000 in 2020 according to data from the Ministry of Religion, he said.

Minority groups welcomed the move to revise the system.

Protestant Pastor Reverend Palti Pandjaitan of the Solidarity Group for Victims of Violations on Freedom of Religion and Belief told UCA News on June 8 that the need for obtaining 60 signatures from neighboring households of different religions also needed to be revised.

Some of these neighbors may be intolerant and opposed to church construction and hence "cannot be handed over responsibility for guaranteeing the right to worship" of their fellow citizens, he said.

"In fact, what must be guaranteed is the right of every citizen to be able to worship in the state," the pastor said.

Catholic priest and social activist Father Antonius Benny Susetyo said the permits should be mandatory only for permanent places of public worship.

Susetyo is also a member of a group appointed by President Joko Widodo for promoting communal tolerance and understanding.

"Places of worship for limited use do not need permits, such as chapels in convents or prayer rooms in family houses," he told UCA News.

Bonar Tigor Naipospos of the Setara Institute for Democracy and Peace said FKUB need not be involved in issuing permits for building houses of worship.

"The function of FKUB should be to become a joint forum, a forum for communication, and play a role in campaigning and promoting tolerance and respect for those who are different," he said.

Naipospos said building permits should be the domain of the federal government, even though the application may be made through the regional office of the Ministry of Religion Affairs.

Meanwhile, Anwar Abbas, deputy chairman of the Indonesian Ulema Council, opposed the plan and warned it could trigger uproar and may cause violence.

"I'm just asking a question, if there is commotion and acts of violence in the community as a result of a policy made by a minister, then who is to blame, the people or the minister?" he said in a statement.

Photo: Indonesia's Minister of Religion Affairs Yaqut Cholil Qoumas. (Photo: The Ministry of Religion Affairs)

Muslims block Christians' construction

Another congregation wins right to build after initial ban.

[Morning Star News](#) (13.03.2023) - Muslims in a village in northeastern Indonesia's portion of Borneo Island prohibited a church from constructing a worship building, sources said.

Local leaders of Selumit village, in Tarakan City in North Kalimantan Province, stated in a Feb. 28 letter that Mawar Sharon Christian Church's proposed construction was against state regulations since it would be located amid the predominantly Muslim Tidung tribes, according to news outlet *kayantara.com*.

Kristianto Triwibowo S.Pi, coordinator of the Indonesian Christian Student Movement (*Gerakan Mahasiswa Kristen Indonesia*, or GMKI), Region VI Chapter, reportedly said the ban defies the Indonesian constitution and the country's philosophy of *Pancasila*, the government's guiding policy of unity and social justice for all of Indonesia's various peoples.

"The state guarantees the right to worship and embrace the religion of all people," Kristianto said in a press statement on March 7. "Instead of rejecting the services of the Mawar Sharon Church (GMS), which should not happen, we must tolerate each other and maintain diversity."

The GMKI encouraged the North Kalimantan and Tarakan City governments, along with the Ministry of Religion and various state agencies, to fully protect activities of the church, which is registered with the Ministry of Religion.

Church in Malang

In East Java Province, Malang Regency, a church won the right to continue constructing a building after Muslims in Sumberejo village, Gedangan Sub-District initially prohibited it.

Sumberejo village head Abdul Rohman prohibited the construction of the East Java Christian Church (*Gereja Kristen Jawi Wetan*, or GKJW) after members of the Sumberejo Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) branch requested a ban in a Jan. 20 letter. The church comprises

20 families, said the chairman of the GKJW Supreme Council, the Rev. Natael Hermawan Prianto.

In the local NU branch's letter, area Muslims reportedly recommended against construction to maintain "harmonious relationships" and "the comfort and security of the community."

Pastor Natael, who helped bring together several related parties to resolve the issue, said that talks with the involvement of the Malang Regency Interreligious Communication Forum (*Forum Komunikasi Umat Beragama*, or FKUB) led to an agreement on March 6 under which residents allowed construction to go forward.

"The church construction will surely be continued," he told Morning Star News.

Requirements for obtaining permission to build houses of worship in Indonesia are onerous and hamper the establishment of such buildings for Christians and other faiths, rights advocates say. Indonesia's Joint Ministerial Decree of 2006 makes requirements for obtaining permits nearly impossible for most new churches.

Even when small, new churches are able to meet the requirement of obtaining 90 signatures of approval from congregation members and 60 from area households of different religions, they are often met with delays or lack of response from officials. Well-organized radical Muslims secretly mobilize outside people to intimidate and pressure members of minority faiths.

Indonesia ranked 33rd on Christian support organization Open Doors' 2023 World Watch List of the 50 countries where it is most difficult to be a Christian. Indonesian society has adopted a more conservative Islamic character, and churches involved in evangelistic outreach are at risk of being targeted by Islamic extremist groups, according to Open Doors' WWL report.

"If a church is seen to be preaching and spreading the gospel, they soon run into opposition from Islamic extremist groups, especially in rural areas," the report noted. "In some regions of Indonesia, non-traditional churches struggle to get permission for church buildings, with the authorities often ignoring their paperwork."

Photo: North Kalimantan Province, Indonesia. (NordNordWest, Creative Commons)
