

KEY FINDINGS

In 2020, religious freedom conditions in Indonesia stagnated. The administration of President Joko Widodo (Jokowi) continued to pursue a policy of promoting its favored interpretation of Islam through state efforts that included attempting to revamp the state ideology of Pancasila, establishing a voluntary certification program for religious officials, and installing “moderate” voices inside the quasi-governmental Indonesia Ulema Council (MUI). However, these measures aimed to combat rising extremist or hardline Islamist trends and to promote tolerance exclusively among officially recognized religions; they did not promote greater religious freedom or expand recognition of other religious minorities.

Religious extremists continued to represent a serious threat against religious minorities and others. In June, a militant extremist [attacked](#) the deputy police chief in Central Java with a knife. In Sulawesi, the radical Islamist group, East Indonesia Mujahideen (MIT), carried out a series of sectarian attacks, [killing](#) four Christians and burning a home that local Christians used for a house of worship.

The enforcement of blasphemy laws, which Indonesia inherited from the Dutch colonial period but expanded under Presidential Decree No. 1/PNPS/1965 and the Law on Information and Electronic Transactions (ITE), continued to impact all religious communities. In May, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) indicated an increase in blasphemy allegations, primarily through application of the ITE law—even as the coronavirus pandemic raged. For example, in March authorities in Probolinggo Regency, East Java, arrested a local man for sharing lewd religious images online; in July, the State Court of East Java sentenced him to four years’ imprisonment and fined him five million Indonesian rupiah (\$350 USD). Beginning in April, a number of people across the country faced arrest and blasphemy charges for sharing a song about a wife of the Prophet Muhammad with altered lyrics that

some religious conservatives found offensive. These detainees included a popular YouTube celebrity who was arrested in April in Medan, North Sumatra, and sentenced in October to seven months’ imprisonment, as well as three young adults in Gorontalo Province who were arrested in May after posting a video of them dancing and singing to the song in question. While these cases involved the dissemination of potentially offensive material, none included incitement to violence.

In July, hardline Islamist organizations and their supporters actively [demonstrated](#) against interfaith activities in West Java and contributed to [obstructing](#) government efforts to reform the official ideology of Pancasila due to concerns about both communism and secularization. In West Sumatra, the governor successfully [petitioned](#) for the removal of a Christian Bible app in the minority Minangkabau language from the Google Play store due to concerns about Christian proselytization to the Muslim-majority community. In May, acting Governor of Aceh Nova Iriansya was likewise successful in removing the Aceh Holy Bible app from the Google Play store.

Last year, USCIRF reported on the September 2019 attempt by the Indonesian legislature to replace the existing Criminal Code, which dates back to the Dutch colonial era. This new code would have [expanded](#) the criminalization of blasphemy to include insulting a religious leader during a religious service, persuading someone to become an atheist, and defiling or unlawfully destroying houses of worship or religious artifacts. Civil society groups led massive protests in response to these and other proposed restrictions, leading the government to delay the bill indefinitely. Throughout 2020, this draft code was neither amended nor removed from consideration in the legislature. NGO reports indicate that the government has failed to soften the provisions in the code that would violate international human rights standards, including religious freedom.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Indonesia on the U.S. Department of State’s Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Urge the Indonesian government to revise the draft Criminal Code bill to remove criminal sanctions for blasphemy; to repeal or amend the existing blasphemy laws, including Indonesia’s ITE law; and to release all individuals currently detained or imprisoned on blasphemy charges;
- Urge the Indonesian government to repeal or revise existing legislation and regulations on houses of worship, including the 2006 Joint Regulation;
- Incorporate training on international human rights standards related to religious freedom—including concerns related to enforcement of blasphemy laws—into U.S.-funded programs, such as the U.S. Agency for International Development’s (USAID) Harmoni and MAJu projects, and work with the Ministry of Education to incorporate programming on tolerance and inclusivity into compulsory education courses on religion; and
- Urge the Indonesian government to take the regional lead on human rights and religious freedom in its capacity in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights, including by publicly advocating on behalf of Uyghurs and other persecuted Muslims throughout the region.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Factsheet:** [Rohingya Refugees in Southeast Asia](#)
- **Factsheet:** [Indonesia’s Pancasila](#)

Background

Indonesia is the world's most populous Muslim-majority country. Muslims [comprise](#) 87.2 percent of Indonesia's 267 million citizens, while Protestant Christians comprise 7 percent, Roman Catholics 2.9 percent, and Hindus 1.7 percent; 0.9 percent identify as another minority religion such as Buddhism or Confucianism. In 2020, the World Bank [upgraded](#) Indonesia's economic ranking from lower- to upper-middle income country.

In light of this diversity, Indonesia has a long tradition of religious pluralism. Article 29 of its constitution "guarantees the independence of each resident to embrace religion and worship according to their respective religions and beliefs." The government has long promoted an ideology known as Pancasila, which comprises five principles: monotheism (broadly defined as any religion with a supreme deity, holy figure, scripture, and established rituals), civilized humanity, national unity, deliberative democracy, and social justice. Efforts in summer 2020 to pass legislation to reform Pancasila failed. These failed reforms included strengthening the government's responsibility to promote the ideology in school and its ability to regulate Pancasila through the Agency for Pancasila Ideology Education. The government officially recognizes only six religions: Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Confucianism, based on a 1952 Ministry of Religious Affairs definition of religion that limits it to monotheistic traditions. Furthermore, the government views Sunnism as the only officially accepted variant of Islam. Violations of religious freedom tend to impact Ahmadiyya and Shi'a Muslims disproportionately as well as Christians, believers outside the six officially recognized faiths, nonbelievers, atheists, and certain indigenous religious communities.

The government also requires all citizens to list their religious affiliation on their identification cards—a practice that has historically forced nonbelievers and members of unrecognized religious minorities to misrepresent their faith or leave the field blank. This omission can impact access to licenses and permits, education, and government jobs.

Shari'a Law in Aceh

Aceh is the only province in Indonesia with the legal authority to enact Shari'a law. Religious police there enforce a strict interpretation of Shari'a that includes and administers corporal punishment. In December 2019, Aceh [introduced](#) its first all-female flogging squad, which it expanded in early 2020. This development was the end result of years of pushing by authorities to assemble such squads to punish women convicted in the Shari'a courts. Behavior is heavily regulated within this framework; for example, couples are in danger of flogging if they sit too close, women are prevented from straddling motorbikes and forced to wear hijabs, and unmarried sexual activity is severely punished. During the pandemic, officials [modified](#) but continued to enforce such corporal punishment.

Houses of Worship

The 2006 Joint Regulation on houses of worship remains an ongoing and systemic barrier to the religious freedom of minority communities, requiring at least 90 congregation members and approval from 60 local households of other religions. In March, a group of petitioners [referred](#) to as the "People's Lawsuit Presidium" requested that the Supreme Court review the regulation, but the request made no subsequent progress. In March and April, two mosques belonging to the Indonesian Ahmadiyya Congregation (JAI) were sealed from use. In Karimun, the local Catholic community faced hardline Muslim resistance to efforts to renovate St. Joseph Catholic Church. The community had received a permit in October 2019, but protests spurred the local authorities to delay its approval. Construction finally began in April 2020, but only after President Jokowi [intervened](#) and the lawsuit that had prevented it was [thrown](#) out in court.

Minority Faith Communities

Members of minority Muslim sects—such as the Milah Abraham faith community (also known as Gafatar), Shi'a Muslims, and Ahmadiyya Muslims—remained especially vulnerable in 2020. MUI has long issued fatwas (religious edicts) declaring these groups "deviant" and heretical to Islam; in 2005, MUI issued a fatwa declaring Ahmadiyya Muslims as apostates, and in 2008 the government banned them from proselytizing, a step that former Indonesia President Abdurrahman Wahid [publicly condemned](#). In January 2020, Ade Munawaroh Yasin, the regent of Bogor, West Java, issued a letter with the support of local Islamists stating that Ahmadiyya Islam was illegal in Bogor. Shi'a Muslims who had been displaced from Madura Island in 2012 by anti-Shi'a violence [remained](#) unable to return home. In November, some members of that community publicly converted to Sunni Islam to return to their homes. In a positive sign, newly appointed Minister of Religious Affairs Yaquut Cholil Qoumas [stated](#) in December his intention to uphold the rights of both Shi'a and Ahmadiyya Muslims.

Key U.S. Policy

The U.S. and Indonesian governments have cooperated closely on counterterrorism and maritime security issues, including with regard to China's territorial claims in the South China Sea. The United States was one of the first countries to establish diplomatic relations with Indonesia in 1949, following its independence from the Netherlands. In October, Indonesia [hosted](#) then U.S. Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo to discuss continued cooperation. The United States also continues to support Indonesian efforts to build regional multilateral cooperation through organizations such as ASEAN.

Throughout 2020, the USAID-funded Harmoni program continued to support the Ministry of Social Affairs and local organizations. Harmoni funding was applied to strengthen Inter-Religious Harmony Forums; to counter extremist narratives through community, university, and school-based campaigns; and to rehabilitate women and children returning from conflict zones in the Middle East and Philippines.

Individual Views of Commissioner Johnnie Moore

I commend the efforts by President Jokowi to promote peaceful coexistence in Indonesian society and to preserve Indonesia's historic (and threatened) wasatiyyah Islam. Our report refers to the Jokowi administration "favoring their preferred view of Islam." There are many issues in Indonesia worthy of concern, but this is not one of them. I am glad that Jokowi is combating extremism by favoring a tolerant, Indonesian Islam and not allowing extremists to hijack the religious culture of the world's most populated Muslim country. Religious freedom and human rights must never be used as a shield for extremists, whether it's via Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)-affiliated Shi'a extremists who threaten Bahrain or Lebanon or al-Qaeda-affiliated Sunni extremists who target Egypt or Indonesia. Religion certainly plays an outsized role in Indonesian society, but as long as it does, then the government should absolutely continue to empower and favor moderates. Thankfully, Indonesia has plenty of them as it has long been home to many of the world's most admirable and credible Islamic scholars and leaders.