



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

COUNTRY UPDATE: INDONESIA

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USCIRF's Mission

*To advance international
freedom of religion or
belief, by independently
assessing and unflinchingly
confronting threats to this
fundamental right.*

Overview

Indonesia is the largest Muslim-majority country in the world, with a constitution that guarantees religious freedom and a government that has long sought international recognition for its promotion of what it touts as “religious harmony.” While the state has taken steps to promote religious tolerance and reduce incidents of religiously motivated terrorism, it has also continued to employ legal frameworks—including a presidential decree and the Criminal Code—to regulate religion, criminalize blasphemy, and broadly infringe on freedom of religion or belief (FoRB).

Within this framework, Indonesia’s religious minorities continue to experience systematic and ongoing discrimination while facing challenges in obtaining official recognition, conducting religious activities, and constructing houses of worship. USCIRF has recommended Indonesia for Special Watch List (SWL) designation since 2020 (and for the equivalent designations from 2003 to 2019) for its systematic and ongoing violations of religious freedom, including in the 2025 [Annual Report](#). This country update provides an overview of these violations that provide the current basis for Indonesia’s recommended SWL inclusion.

USCIRF Delegation to Indonesia

In May, USCIRF traveled to Indonesia to assess religious freedom conditions in the country. The delegation met with government officials, religious communities, and civil society leaders who shared varied interests and perspectives on FoRB and the broader human rights climate under President Prabowo Subianto’s administration since his election in October 2024.

During the visit, leaders from Indonesia’s recognized religions shared with USCIRF an optimistic perspective regarding religious inclusion in society and expressing high hopes for the Prabowo administration. However, some acknowledged that areas for improvement exist in achieving religious freedom for all, particularly in regard to the legal recognition of minority religions. In contrast, independent civil society groups and representatives of minority religious communities raised serious concerns about existing regulations and decrees that violate FoRB. According to those groups, such violations include local authorities’ tendency to tolerate efforts by conservative members of the Muslim majority to impede gatherings of religious minorities and other challenges. Some individuals raised concerns about President Prabowo’s troubling human rights record and early signs of democratic backsliding as cause for pessimism regarding his administration’s approach to improving religious freedom for all.



Lack of Recognition for Religious Minorities

While the six recognized religions in Indonesia (Islam, Buddhism, Catholicism, Confucianism, Hinduism, and Protestantism) enjoy extensive legal protections, religious communities that fall outside of those beliefs—or outside of the government’s perception of the acceptable form of those beliefs, such as Sunni Islam—often face discrimination and mistreatment in society and from local authorities. These communities include Ahmadiyya and Shi’a Muslims, Baha’is, followers of indigenous beliefs, and Jehovah’s Witnesses. According to an Indonesia-based nongovernmental organization (NGO), as many as 421 laws and regulations from local municipalities discriminate against minority religions across the country, at least 70 of which specifically target or marginalize Ahmadiyya Muslims.

In 2024, the Indonesian government partly responded to longstanding criticism of this legal inequality by adding a seventh category on national identification cards to recognize *Penghayat Kepercayaan*, or “Believers of a Faith.” This new category has largely benefited followers of indigenous beliefs, while other minority groups and nonbelievers saw no change in their ongoing challenges. Religious minorities continued to struggle to obtain marriage licenses, permission to access burial sites, eligibility for military service, and access to government employment and services. As a result, many Indonesians from the communities not recognized by the government nominally change their religion on paper to navigate these inconsistencies, unfairly limiting their freedom to openly express their religious identity (or lack thereof). Moreover, this lack of official recognition continues to

result in uneven or unequal allocation of government resources, discriminating against religious minority groups as they receive significantly fewer financial subsidies and support for compulsory religious education teachers as compared to recognized religious groups.

The Ministry of Human Rights has announced plans to draft a religious freedom bill, ostensibly to end discrimination against religious minority groups—but its scope, timeline, and alignment with international FoRB standards remain unclear.

Barrier to Conducting Religious Activities: Building Permits for Houses of Worship

Challenges in Obtaining Permits

In 2006, the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs issued the Joint Regulation on Houses of Worship, requiring all religious groups to obtain permission from their local community in the form of an *Izin Mendirikan Bangunan* (IMB), a permit to construct new houses of worship. Although the government ostensibly intended this regulation to promote community-level interreligious “harmony,” in reality it has caused friction at the local level and politicized the construction of houses of worship, often allowing conservative Islamist hardliners and other intolerant groups to object to such projects. Under the 2006 regulation, religious groups must submit a list of 90 congregation members, support from 60 households of a different faith, and recommendations from religious authorities and the local Interfaith Harmony Forum, or *Forum Kerukunan Umat Beragama* (FKUB), to establish a house of worship.

Even if a given group meets these requirements, local governments can deny or revoke their permit without FKUB consensus. Additionally, the local authorities maintain broad authority over houses of worship built prior to 2006.

Religious minority communities, including from officially recognized religions, continue to fall victim to these IMB restrictions. Individuals from Catholic, Protestant, Hindu, Ahmadiyya Muslim, and Jehovah's Witnesses communities shared with USCIRF their related ordeals. For instance, in Bandung city, West Java, the Saint Odilia Catholic Church faced a series of protests from local Muslim residents as congregants celebrated Mass during Lent in early 2025. Their detractors opposed the church's religious use of a multipurpose building, claiming that such use requires an IMB. Tensions have persisted despite intervention by local officials and the Ministry of Human Rights, as some residents continue to reject the church's activities. In a similar incident in June 2025, a mob of some 200 people reportedly marched on a home that Christians were using for a youth retreat in Sukabumi, West Java, accused them of using the home as an unlicensed prayer hall, vandalized the property, and forced dozens of children to flee.

Ahmadiyya Muslim communities consistently face difficulties in receiving IMBs, and authorities have worsened their plight by sealing off many Ahmadiyya Muslim mosques and banning visible signage outside of others. Hindu communities, too, have highlighted the reluctance both the government and society manifested toward granting the Hindu community IMB permits.

The Role of FKUBs (Interfaith Harmony Fora)

The government has long claimed to have instituted FKUBs to foster religious harmony and to prevent or mitigate conflict at the local level—and in some instances, it has succeeded in doing so. For example, the FKUB in Bogor city, West Java, was instrumental in assisting the Protestant GKI Yasmin Church to resolve a decades-long dispute over a church building. Through dialogue and mediation, the FKUB worked with opposing religious leaders and the government to ensure that the church was finally able to build a place of worship in 2021 after years of IMB legal battles and location disputes. The success of Bogor's FKUB received national attention, and many FKUBs from other regions have visited to learn from its experience.

The primary challenge of FKUBs is that they operate inconsistently across the country, and in many instances,

they contribute to discrimination rather than promote interreligious coexistence. By design, local religious councils or groups select FKUB members to represent their interests, but in some localities, majority religious groups maintain sufficient influence excluding minorities from representation. This situation places such religious minorities in a disadvantaged and marginalized position when applying for an IMB permit or conducting religious activities at a location without the permit. To address this issue, then Minister of Religious Affairs Yaqut Cholil Qoumas announced in June 2023 plans to eliminate the requirement for a recommendation from FKUB as a condition for establishing houses of worship. Then Vice President Ma'ruf Amin, however, vetoed the proposal, leaving the requirement in place. It is unclear whether the Prabowo administration intends to pursue any such changes to the FKUB's role in granting IMB permission.

Blasphemy Laws

In January 1965, then President Sukarno issued a decree that prohibited blasphemy ("acts of hostility" toward religions)—the same decree that established Indonesia's precedent of recognizing only the six aforementioned religions. His government immediately incorporated this blasphemy provision into the country's Criminal Code, establishing penalties of up to five years in prison for convicted offenders. In the subsequent 60 years, the government has used the blasphemy law to target religious minorities, such as Christians, Shi'a or Ahmadiyya Muslims, and political opponents. In practice, anyone can stand accused of blasphemy regardless of their religious background, and acquittals are exceedingly rare.

For example, in 2024 an Indonesian comedian was found guilty of blasphemy for making a joke about the name of the Prophet Muhammad during a performance. A court sentenced him to seven months in prison. In March 2025, a transgender Muslim and TikTok influencer was sentenced to nearly three years in prison for spreading "defamation" against Christianity. The court ruled that her comments suggesting Jesus should cut his hair had disrupted public order and religious "harmony."

In a concerning development, Indonesia's new Criminal Code, which the government passed in December 2022 and is scheduled to take effect in 2026, would expand the scope of the blasphemy law to include criminalizing "hostility based on religion" in addition to preexisting statutes against "insulting" or "defaming" religion. The new Criminal Code also includes an

article—the first of its kind for Indonesia—that outlaws leaving a religion or a belief as “apostasy.” Furthermore, anyone whom authorities accuse of attempting to persuade a person to convert from one religion or belief to another could face prosecution and imprisonment. This concerning trajectory is also apparent in the revision process of Indonesia’s Criminal Procedure Code (KUHAP), for which a final draft is expected by the end of 2025 and aims to align with the new and problematic Criminal Code.

Rising Religious Discrimination at the Local Level

According to Indonesian civil society groups, hijab requirements for schools and workplaces represent an area of widespread concern for religious freedom, particularly at the local level. In September 2022, the Ministry of Education issued a regulation allowing personal choice in school uniforms; however, many provincial and local governments have simply ignored the national regulation. As of 2025, more than 70 local regulations across the country require female students to wear a hijab in school, including non-Muslim girls. Those students who refuse to comply often face bullying, intimidation, and pressure to withdraw from their peers, teachers, and school officials. Civil society activists also reported that in some instances, local authorities have either fired some female civil servants or forced them to resign due to their refusal to acquiesce to hijab requirements. Moreover, local authorities across Indonesia have enacted as many as 421 vague and discriminatory regulations to preserve “morality” or “religious norms,” which in practice serve to restrict women’s freedom of movement, dress, and participation in public life.

Some local governments have also moved to institute regulations based on strict interpretations of Islamic principles. For instance, during Ramadan, some local governments prohibited coffee shops and karaoke lounges from opening for business. Such authorities have also prohibited Valentine’s Day celebrations in some parts of the country, as some Sunni Muslim clerics and religious leaders claim that its observance runs counter to Islamic teachings, thus imposing a particular interpretation of a religious belief.

Additionally, since the October 2023 Hamas attack on Israeli civilians, a marked elevation in antisemitic sentiment—including threats of violence—and the government’s failure to respond directly or adequately has negatively impacted Indonesia’s small Jewish community, forcing its members into hiding with threats of violence. Civil society representatives have also shared with USCIRF the negative impacts of U.S. funding cuts on FoRB-related initiatives in Indonesia, including programs aimed at fostering interreligious dialogue and religious literacy, preventing extremism, and providing legal aid to victims of FoRB violations.

Conclusion

The Indonesian government has made some efforts and policies to foster religious inclusivity and prevent extremist violence. However, systematic and ongoing religious freedom concerns persist, including the lack of legal recognition and protection for many religious minority communities throughout Indonesia. Furthermore, there are various challenges impacting religious groups from freely, privately or publicly, practicing their faith. Such restrictions include obtaining permits for building houses of worship, expanding the scope of blasphemy laws, and enforcing restrictive hijab requirements for females, particularly targeting students and civil servants.



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