

INDONESIA

Over the past decade, Indonesia has evolved into a stable democracy with strong human rights protections. The government of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono has taken positive steps to address terrorism and past sectarian violence, end a civil war in Aceh, and curtail terrorist networks. However, religious tolerance recently has come under increasing strain. Under the banner of Islamic orthodoxy, groups espousing intolerance and extremism have intimidated, discriminated against, and committed acts of violence against religious minorities. Segments of the Indonesian government, including the police, sometimes tolerate these groups' activities. Despite legal protections for religious freedom, national laws and provincial decrees have been used to restrict the freedom of religion and belief. Based on these concerns, USCIRF continues to place Indonesia on its Watch List in 2011. Indonesia has been on the Commission's Watch List since 2002.

BACKGROUND

Religious radicalism and extremist groups, who have found converts in the country, are challenging Indonesia's well-known tradition of religious tolerance and pluralism -- leading to sectarian and societal violence, terrorism, and religious freedom violations. While Indonesians have rejected extremism at the polls, it often goes unchallenged by many political, civic, and religious leaders. Over the past several years, the influence, visibility, and activities of extremist groups have led to sectarian tensions, religious freedom violations, and violence. Hard-line activists and extremist organizations, such as the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), wield considerable influence, particularly in some provincial governments and parts of the Indonesian bureaucracy. They have successfully advanced their agenda, pressuring government officials, judges, and politicians through private lobbying, media, demonstrations, threats, and mob action. Such efforts resulted in the 2008 Joint Ministerial Decree on the Ahmadiyah, the Anti-Pornography Law, the extensive use of the "blasphemy law," and continued use of local sharia-inspired laws in some provincial areas. Coalitions of moderate Muslims, Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, and other religious and civil society groups have opposed these measures, both politically and in the public square. These coalition members recently have become targets of intimidation and violence, including in March 2011 when "book bombs" were sent to police officials and moderate Muslim organizations. Despite increased radicalization among some groups, the Indonesian government has been largely successful in its anti-terrorism campaign. It continues to make notable progress in capturing, apprehending, prosecuting, and jailing persons accused of specific terrorist activities, including many individuals on the U.S. most wanted list.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONDITIONS

Extremist groups continue to attack religious minorities and have actively sought to ban all Ahmadiyah activities. The Indonesian government continues to implement laws that violate the freedom of religion or belief and has ineffectively deterred the violence that non-state actors have perpetrated against religious minorities.

The Challenge of Extremism: Islamic extremist groups continue to attack Ahmadiyah sites, Christian churches, Shi'a mosques, Hindu temples, bars, and nightclubs with relative impunity; intimidate judges and local officials; vandalize and destroy minority religious sites, including Christian churches, Hindu temples, and Ahmadiyah and Shi'a mosques; threaten moderate Muslims or those considered to have "deviant" theological views; and force the closure of some businesses during Ramadan. Over the last year, extremist groups reportedly forcibly closed as many as 40 religious venues. The most frequent targets were Ahmadiyah mosques and Protestant and Catholic congregations, which have spread, along with better economic and housing options, to new areas of Indonesia. In some areas, extremist groups interpret the existence of new Protestant or Catholic religious venues as evidence of proselytizing, an activity Indonesian laws ban. Hindu temples and Shi'a mosques also have been targeted in past years. Though these extremist groups are a tiny minority of Indonesia's diverse Muslim community, they remain an active and organized force and a political challenge to the country's image as a democracy committed to religious tolerance and pluralism.

Violence and Legal Restrictions Targeting Ahmadiyah Muslims: Extremist groups are seeking a ban on all Ahmadiyah activities in Indonesia. Violence and legal restrictions targeting the Ahmadiyah community started after a July 2005 Indonesian Ulema Council fatwa that condemned them as a heretical sect, a decree that the Indonesian National Commission of the Human Rights called unconstitutional. Under intense pressure from extremist groups and some

mainstream religious leaders, the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Home Ministry issued in June 2008 a Joint Ministerial Letter on the Restriction of Ahmadiyah. While not an outright ban, the decree “froze” Ahmadiyah activities to private worship and prohibited Ahmadiyahs from proselytizing, although it also outlawed vigilantism against them. Since the 2008 decree, 49 Ahmadiyah mosques have been vandalized and 34 mosques and religious meeting points forcibly closed. Over the last year, violence against them has increased, with three followers killed in mob violence in Banten province in February 2011. In June 2010, a mob of 500 people tried to tear down the al-Ghofur Mosque and later clashed with police. In late July 2010, police allowed a mob to forcibly close a mosque and in October, in an attack against the Ahmadiyah community, mobs burned down a mosque and several houses.

Government Complicity in Violations and Impunity: Despite some strong public statements and arrests, the Indonesian government’s reactive approach has not deterred the violence perpetuated by non-state actors against religious minorities. Indonesian government officials also continue to use the “blasphemy law” to harass and detain individuals considered religiously “deviant” and allow the enforcement of local laws restricting the rights of women and some non-Muslims, particularly in Aceh. The blasphemy law to some degree has legitimized extremist activity, as have government-funded institutions that call for a ban on Ahmadiyah religious activities and restrictions on interfaith marriage and worship, religious pluralism, and yoga, among other things. Often in the name of religious harmony, these institutions pressure provincial officials to close religious minorities’ places of worship or take action against groups viewed as having “deviant” religious views. In addition, the police sometimes stand by while attacks take place, or even participate in them, according to human rights and religious freedom studies. Provincial officials also have forcibly closed, blocked, and delayed building permits for religious venues. The government requires a religious group with a membership of more than 90 persons to obtain the support of 60 local residents, in order to build or expand a religious venue.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

In response to the violations of religious freedom that continue in Indonesia, the U.S. government should:

- Use the U.S.-Indonesia Comprehensive Partnership to create regular human rights dialogues and target economic assistance to support government offices and civil society organizations working to promote religious freedom;
- Urge the Indonesian government to overturn the Joint Ministerial Decree on the Ahmadiyah community and any provincial bans on Ahmadiyah religious practice, fully protect the rights of religious minority communities under the Indonesian constitution and international law, and arrest or hold accountable any individual who organizes or carries out societal violence targeting the Ahmadiyah or other religious minorities;
- Urge the Indonesian government to set national policies regarding the protection of religious freedom and religious minorities, and implement these guidelines throughout the government; and
- Urge the Indonesian government to take a more pro-active role in improving religious tolerance, including by working with the National Broadcasting Commission to create new media focusing on the importance of religious freedom and developing curricula to teach respect for the adherents of all religions in elementary and secondary schools.

Please see USCIRF’s 2011 Annual Report for a more extensive review and recommendations on Indonesia.