



# Religious Freedom under Attack in Indonesia

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**I**ndonesia, the world's largest Islamic nation, has a long and well-respected history of religious tolerance that has been embraced from its beginning. The Indonesian constitution guarantees freedom of religion, although it recognizes only some of the world's major religions, namely, Islam (with eighty percent of the population), Protestantism (seven percent), Catholicism (three percent), Buddhism (two percent), Hinduism (one percent), and Confucianism (less than one percent). In some remote areas, the tribal religions are animist.

The secularism of official Indonesia derives from its modern founding fathers' philosophy of *Pancasila* meaning "the five principles." These are: (1) belief in the one and only God; (2) just and civilized humanity; (3) unity of Indonesia; (4) democracy through consultation and representation; and (5) social justice for all Indonesian people. Though the Pancasila's "One God" principle obviously favors Islam and Christianity, animists, Hindus, and Taoists-Buddhists-Confucianists (mainly Chinese Indonesians) have traditionally been respected and allowed to practice their religions unmolested.

## A HISTORY OF RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE

Christian Churches have flourished in Indonesia for a long time. In Java, Sumatra, South Sulawesi, and in other Muslim regions of the nation, the religious life

*Recent religious violence in Indonesia calls the Indonesian church and churches around the world to a more serious commitment to critical and creative dialogue and to intentional efforts at peacemaking.*

of Christian communities continues without great hindrance. There is freedom of worship (though the freedom to build needed churches has been extremely restricted since the beginning of the Suharto era), freedom of religious instruction, freedom to baptize, and freedom to become a Christian (or Muslim). Church bells ring out during liturgical hours every day in many parts of Indonesia.

An example of Indonesian tolerance is seen in the Christian celebration of Christmas, which is an Indonesian national holiday. In one recent year, I recall how I heard the sweet tones of schoolchildren practicing Christmas carols in every town in North Sumatra. “Angels We Have Heard on High” was a big favorite, with the enthusiastic Gloria chorus fading out in the lower registers. I heard “O Come All Ye Faithful” in Bahasa Indonesian many times and “Santa Claus Is Coming to Town” played by a teen rock band. “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” which is considered a Christmas carol, resonated at every rehearsal. Also on Samosir Island, North Sumatra, lines of motorbikes were parked by the road at the community park where a stage had been set up. Clutches of young men hovered at the edges of the crowd watching the teenage girls in the choir. Children in tidy school uniforms walked to the microphone and read passages from the Bible in the same too-fast, nervous chirping heard in American auditoriums. Then they bowed quickly and hastened to their chairs while an indulgent teacher beamed and parents applauded.

Some families decorate artificial trees, exchange gifts on December 25, and send cards to distant family members. With a country so spread out, television provides the glue for national unity. On Christmas Day, a government official makes a speech on the usual topics of peace, unity, and tolerance for other religions; this is followed by televised church programs and government-sponsored programming of singing and dancing.

On Bali (where the majority embraces Hinduism), Christmas is left to tourists and expatriates; a unique blend of Hinduism, Buddhism, and animism serves as the local religion. During the holiday season, many Westerners decorate live trees with wooden ornaments carved for export—and note the irony that many of the items people around the world purchase for Christmas gifts are made in a country where the holiday is hardly noticed by most. Seasonal decorations are hung in stores, and tree ornaments have become available as more Europeans, Australians, and Americans come to live on Bali. These expatriates go to the big hotels or restaurants for special Christmas and New Year’s dinners and performances. Usually the presents are new clothes for holiday celebrations at the local church, where the community joins the children singing traditional Christmas carols in Bahasa Indonesian.

## RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE UNDER THREAT

Unfortunately, religious tension and violence against religious minorities have increased sharply during the last ten years. Most terrible have been the con-

frontations between Christians and Muslims in parts of the Moluccas and Central Sulawesi. The island of Ambon, in the eastern part of the Indonesian province of Moluccas, was wracked by prolonged and violent outbreaks of conflict between Muslims and Christians from early 1999 to 2002. In 1999, the number of casualties in Ambon and the surrounding provincial islands has been estimated at 10,000 deaths and a staggering 700,000 displaced persons—almost one third of the population.

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A recent event in Binjai, North Sumatra, adds to this sad story. On May 1, 2008, local authorities accompanied by an Islamist mob attempted to demolish a church building belonging to Huria Kristen Batak Protestan Binjai Baru (HKBP is the Batak Protestant Christian Church). Since authorities had sealed the building in 2007, members of HKBP had been meeting in homes. The church maintained ownership of the building in hopes of being able to resume worship there some day. According to the pastor of HKBP Binjai Baru, the Reverend Monang Silaban, the buildings had been subject to vandalism and theft. Other church leaders in North Sumatra had obtained permission from local authorities to use the building but failed to obtain a worship permit from district officials when objections from Muslims erupted in September 2005. The previous year, Muslims had built an Islamic school on a lot directly in front of the church compound without any hindrance and with official permission. Banned from the buildings, church members began to worship on the street and tensions grew. Some Muslims assaulted the pastor on October 30, 2007, and this led to an agreement under which the congregations would cease worshipping in the street and officials would help the Christians find a place to build a worship facility; the buildings would not be torn down. Unfortunately, authorities did nothing to help locate an alternative worship place.

On March 10, 2008, officials informed church leaders and their lawyers that the buildings would be destroyed on May 1, 2008. When the church members and their lawyers arrived to meet with the Binjai head, the village leader simply handed them a letter from a Binjai district official ordering them to remove equipment from the buildings, as they were scheduled to be demolished. The pastors pointed out that demolition would be in violation of the 2007 agreement, but authorities told them the agreement was no longer in force. According to some sources, on January 1, 2008, local residents had seen Reverend Silaban and other Christians praying in one of the buildings, which they had entered after finding that vandals had removed some doors and windows and stolen a podium, pews, and electrical fans, among other equipment. Suspecting the Christians would reopen the church, the local residents reported what they had seen to officials. At the meeting with authorities two days later, local authorities refused to listen to Silaban's explana-

tion for why they had entered the building. As the meeting broke up, the pastor asked the village head if the church could use the village hall for worship. He replied, "Sure, as long as it's for a mass circumcision."

Clearly, religious hatred can grow and develop its own momentum. Some hard-line groups now openly advocate religious exclusivism and sometimes resort to violence against what they regard as "sinful places." Groups have also emerged that openly voice extremely sectarian views in their publications, encouraging an atmosphere of fear and violence. There has been an unfortunate tendency toward religious segregation. For instance, twenty years ago, the Majelis Ulama Indonesia (the Indonesian Council of Muslim Clerics) promulgated a *fatwa* demanding that Muslims should refrain from expressing Christmas greetings to Christians. Since then, a whole tradition of grassroots interreligious contact has dried up. I have also heard Muslim friends express their dismay at the situation in schools where teachers of religion have told their children not to have contacts with Chinese children or children of other religions.

#### THE CASE OF AHMADIYYAH

Muslim-Christian conflict is not the only problem; conflicts among Islamic groups have developed as well. Jemaah Ahmadiyah, a Muslim sect regarded as heretical, came to Indonesia from Pakistan in 1925. In the past eighty-three years, the group has attracted 200,000 adherents in Indonesia—a gnat compared with the more than 215 million Indonesians who are members of the mainstream branches of Islam. The Ahmadi have their own mosques, mullahs, and imams; but the gulf that separates Shiites and Sunnis and other Muslim sects from one another is not as wide as that which separates Ahmadiyah from any other Muslim group. Ahmadiis believe that their founder, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, was the last prophet of God, not the Prophet Mohammed (Peace Be upon Him). Orthodox Islam believes that the great prophets of Allah, the One True God, were Ibrahim, Moses, Isa (Jesus), and Mohammed. The Ahmadiis are therefore seen to be breaking one of the fundamental articles of mainstream Islamic faith.

Until recently, no one bothered much with the Ahmadiis. Now, however, with the recent rise of fundamentalist Islam, members of the group have been persecuted. From 2005 until today, they have suffered gross human rights violations. The attacks on Ahmadiyah mosques, priests, and members increased after 1980, when the Indonesian Council of Muslim Clerics (MUI) issued a *fatwa* against the sect for being heretical. The Saudi Arabian Embassy in Indonesia even got involved. It wrote the Indonesian government's Department of Religion to recommend that the sect be banned. Three years later, the Department of Religion issued an edict proclaiming Ahmadiyah to be heretical and a danger to the Indonesian nation. Indonesia's Human Rights Commission then formed a special task committee to monitor the Ahmadiis' plight. It found that once the government made its formal declaration of heresy, groups of Muslims organized in mosques or religious

association headquarters actively marched against the Ahmadis with placards and banners in Jakarta. They shouted threats, evicted Ahmadis who were praying, vandalized and even burned mosques. Some local law and order authorities and policemen even participated in the attacks. Radical and hard-line Muslim sects began to hold regular rallies and raids against the Ahmadis. Civil society groups, including both moderate Muslim and Christian human rights activists, moved to defend the Ahmadis. Central government authorities then took action and arrested and jailed perpetrators of violence. But this only increased the fury of the Muslim demonstrators, who cried, “Jihad! Jihad! Jihad!” and threatened to break open the jails were the arrested radicals were kept. On Monday, June 9, 2008, the government announced tough restrictions against the Jemaah Ahmadiyyah while up to 5,000 angry Muslim hard-liners shouted calls for holy war, waved banners outside police headquarters, and blocked the main route to the presidential palace.

The government decree did not quite fulfill the fundamentalist Muslims’ demand for the abolition of Ahmadiyyah, but it will surely kill it as a public religion. It forbids Ahmadiyyah from “spreading interpretations and activities that deviate from the principal teachings of Islam.” It specifies as forbidden “the spreading of the belief that there is another prophet with his own teachings after Prophet Mohammed.”

#### A COMPLEX BACKGROUND

Why has religious tolerance deteriorated in Indonesia during the recent years? The factor of “provocation” is often cited. In Indonesia, this is a stereotypical explanation for communal conflicts, but its use raises the question of why people claim so easily to be provoked. It cannot be denied that exclusivist tendencies are on the increase, both in religious and tribal communities. People of other religions are declared “godless,” and children are warned to avoid contact with “heathens.” “Horror stories” are told about rival religious groups. Mutual distrust and prejudices accumulate and intercommunal relations subsequently heat up.

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Indonesians are burdened with a very difficult common history, of course, a history of crusades and colonialism, of Arab invasions and three hundred years of the “Turkish threat.” Muslims in Indonesia are suspicious of Christian intentions, since Christianity arrived with the colonialists. These suspicions have been reinforced by uncontrolled proselytizing by certain Christian groups. Christians, on the other hand, are suspicious that Muslims, should they come to power, would restrict their religious freedom. If conflicts break out, regardless of the causes—or if they are provoked by outside parties with their own political intentions—they can feed on old suspicions and prejudices and become widespread.

Thus, religious sensitivities constitute a constant danger to religious harmony and practical tolerance.

But this does not explain why negative emotions have become so strong during the last years. One of the reasons is that the Indonesian society is in the grip of a culture of violence. The Indonesian society is in a sick condition. Why? Indonesia is essentially a pluralistic nation. The country consists of hundreds of tribes, ethnic groups, and local cultures. People belong to various religions. They are spread out over thousands of islands and have high mobility, with many spontaneously going to other places while others migrate through government-sponsored programs of transmigration.<sup>1</sup> Such a pluralistic nation can only live together in a peaceful way if it develops the psychological capability for tolerance—the acceptance of a plurality of traditions, ways of life and communication, worldviews and religious customs—while at the same time avoiding excessive stress as an outcome of this coexistence. But now, the fabric of national unity is beginning to rupture. There is a narrowing of the focus of attention to one's own group in an exclusivist way, where the feeling of “we Indonesians” is replaced up by a perspective of “us” against “them”—where “them” can mean the government, the military, the Chinese, people of other religions or tribes, or even the neighboring village.

But again, why have these disintegrating tendencies increased so much during the last ten years? The decisive factor must be sought in the experience of the Indonesian people during the last decades; we must come to understand the impact of the political system of Suharto's “New Order.”<sup>2</sup> The New Order was essentially a system of institutionalized violence. Real power, down to village level, lay in

<sup>1</sup>Under President Suharto, development and modernization of Indonesian urban centers, as well as rising living standards, caused urban population density to rise dramatically: rural peoples migrated to the cities in search of jobs. To counteract this, Suharto sanctioned transmigration programs, moving people from the islands of Java, Bali, and Madura to other areas, including Papua, Kalimantan, Sumatra, the Moluccas, and Sulawesi. At its peak between 1979 and 1984, 535,000 families, or almost 2.5 million people, moved under the transmigration program. The stated purpose of the program was to reduce poverty and overcrowding, provide opportunities for hardworking poor people, and to provide a workforce to better utilize the natural resources of the outer islands. Critics of this program accused the government of using these migrants to replace native populations and to weaken separatist movements. The program became a subject of considerable controversy and conflict, including violence between settlers and indigenous populations.

<sup>2</sup>On March 11, 1966, the first Indonesian president, Sukarno, wrote the “Letter of March 11,” later referred to as *Surat Perintah Sebelas Maret* or “Supersemar,” which formally granted Suharto, the army commander, emergency powers over the nation. Through this, Suharto established what he called the New Order (*Orde Baru*). Suharto permanently banned the Communist Party of Indonesia and its alleged front groups, purged the parliament and cabinet of Sukarno-loyalists, eliminated labor unions, and instituted press censorship. Internationally, Suharto put Indonesia on a course toward improved relations with Western nations while ending its friendly relations with the People's Republic of China. To maintain order, Suharto greatly expanded the funding and powers of the Indonesian state apparatus. He established two intelligence agencies, the Operational Command for the Restoration of Security and Order (KOPKAMTIB) and the State Intelligence Coordination Agency (BAKIN) to deal with threats to the regime. These new government bodies were put under a military regional command structure that, under Suharto, was given a “dual function” as a defense force and as a civilian administration. As unchecked forces in Indonesian society under New Order, however, members of the military and of the ruling Golkar Party were heavily involved as intermediaries between businesses (foreign and domestic) and the Indonesian government. This led to a great deal of corruption. Funds from these practices often flowed to foundations controlled by the Suharto family. See Kirsten E. Schulze, “Laskar Jihad and the Conflict in Ambon,” *The Brown Journal of World Affairs* 9/1 (2002) 57–69.

the hands of the military. Dissent and protest were always brutally suppressed. The people were depoliticized through a policy of “floating mass” where the two legal political parties, themselves severely incapacitated, were not allowed to operate at the village or local level, while the government party, Golkar, was in power through the village officials. Thus the people had no way to express themselves politically. Although most people did benefit somewhat from “development” (*pembangunan*), the extreme differences between the common people and those who really profited from “development” were obvious to everybody. More and more people had to give up their land or houses for government-sponsored projects that often profited only the rich, while the displaced groups received inadequate compensation, which often did not even reach them. People felt themselves becoming “victims of development,” but they had to be silent, because, if they protested, they would be accused of being communists or Muslim extremists. The only thing people really learned was that the government understood but one language: that of violence.

Furthermore, one sees an emergence of communalistic conflicts not only in Indonesia but all over the globe. These develop as a consequence of modernization—and now, of globalization—that has resulted in a far-reaching transformation of the Indonesian society. Modernization and globalization exert enormous pressures on people, since their benefits and threats are not equally distributed. Only upper middle-class people and the elite enjoy the benefits, while lower middle-class and poorer people most often feel the negative impacts and threats. Modernization is pushing society into a continuing condition of stress. It is also creating disorientation, dislocation, and the dysfunction of traditional social mechanisms and traditional individual capabilities. Individuals and whole communities experience economic, psychological, and political threats to their identity and existence. The most obvious sign of this dislocation is urbanization, where the only effective law is that of brutal competition for scarce opportunities for survival.

#### RECONCILIATION AND PROSPECTS FOR SUSTAINED PEACE

Like conflicted groups in many places around the world, the people of Indonesia are in desperate need of a new form of dialogue. All must realize that Indonesian Muslims and Christians are confronted with similar issues—including human rights, poverty, and injustice—all of which need to be resolved together with no group required to lose its own faith.

One great historical example of Christian-Muslim relationship is described by my MTh supervisor Mark Swanson as he traces how Christians and Muslims together forged a new Arabic-language civilization in the ninth and tenth centuries. Christians and Muslims translated the classics of Greek science and philosophy into Arabic and created a new Arabic science and Arabic philosophy. They bore witness to one another and explained and defended their Christian and Islamic

commitments by developing a common language. In true dialogue, all participants bear witness, but they do so peaceably, without manipulation, in the hope of new understanding and in the expectation of being transformed—“converted” in ways that faithful Christians and Muslims can safely leave up to God. The hope for all Christians is that this down-to-earth conversation will be enabled and enlightened by the Spirit who “guides into all the truth” (John 16:13).<sup>3</sup>

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Such open dialogue will not just happen, of course, especially amid the great tensions in today’s world, not least among the religions. But Christians are called to respond to such tensions and to ameliorate them whenever possible. Therefore, as a Christian living among a great number of Muslims and people of other faiths in Indonesia, I would like to offer some challenges to my own church and to other readers of this journal. Neither the religious groups of Indonesia nor those of other regions will be able to resolve their difficulties without the support of people of good will around the world—especially since globalization is a significant factor in producing the present conflicts.

First, the church is challenged to examine and explore its relations with people of other faiths, moving beyond passive tolerance to constant, critical, and creative dialogue with them. Frequent interfaith encounter must be developed early on in order to respond critically to adherents who use religious rationale to justify oppression, injustice, and violence. Interfaith dialogue may not be possible once conflict has arisen and will certainly be less fruitful if relationships of trust have not already been built before such conflicts break out.

Second, the church is challenged to respond to the increase in missionary activity and the phenomenal growth of new religious movements in many areas. Often these groups promote a kind of faith that is alien to the cultural identity of the communities to which they come.

Third, the church is challenged to reassess critically its own history and evaluate its own involvement in ethnic-religious conflict. This is not a simple matter, and it may involve a painful process. Breaking down walls of division and finding reconciliation with other groups is especially difficult when there has been long and bitter enmity among them. Yet, as the church listens to the Spirit of Christ it will be challenged to abandon old ways and to move in new directions under the leading of that Spirit.

Fourth, the church is challenged to live as a prophetic sign of the new creation and to be a servant of the reconciliation of God. The local congregation should be a

<sup>3</sup>See Mark Swanson, “Thinking through Islam,” *Word & World* 22/3 (2002) 273–274.

community characterized in its life, mission, and worship by inclusivity and by advocacy for the rights of others, thereby underlining the reconciling work of Christ, who has broken down barriers of ethnicity and race, creating a new people in the Spirit among whom there is “neither Jew nor Greek” (Gal 3:28). Christian ministers must be encouraged and supported to stand for the gospel that is above ethnic and religious ties and work for peace in their communities. In order to develop wise leadership in these matters, there is a clear need for theological seminaries and church educational activities and programs to include peace education and conflict resolution programs in their curricula.

Last but not least, as the largest Lutheran church in Indonesia and Asia, the HKBP (Batak Protestant Christian Church) is called to initiate and continuously work toward lasting peace in the world. Since peace and justice are inherently linked, the HKBP needs to commit itself to a pattern of life that might be summarized in the ten broad practices proposed by an international group of peace workers: support nonviolent direct action; take independent initiatives to reduce threat; use cooperative conflict resolution; acknowledge responsibility for conflict and injustice, seeking repentance and forgiveness; advance democracy, human rights, and religious liberty; foster just and sustainable economic development; work with emerging cooperative forces in the international system; strengthen international efforts for cooperation and human rights; reduce offensive weapons and weapons trades; and encourage grassroots peacemaking groups and voluntary associations.<sup>4</sup>

As Christians are brought together by mutually recognizing the “cloud of witnesses” in churches around the world, they can make a contribution to peace by using their newfound solidarity to encourage one another to walk in discipleship of Jesus rather than succumbing to the divisive voices of mistrust, hatred, and violence. ☩

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<sup>4</sup>See Glen Stassen, ed., *Just Peacemaking: Ten Practices for Abolishing War* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1998). Gary Simpson makes reference to the ten practices in his essay “Our Pacific Mandate: Orienting Just Peacemaking as Lutherans,” *Journal of Lutheran Ethics* 5/6 (June 2005) par. 50; online at <http://archive.elca.org/jle/article.asp?k=542> (accessed 2 July 2008).