

# Why Religious Violence has Grown in Indonesia

By [WEA](#)

Attacks on Christians and other minorities in this Muslim-majority archipelago are being routinely reported in national and international media. Liberal Muslims of Indonesia, home to the world's largest Muslim population, are calling it the worst manifestation of religious extremism in decades.

Most recently, a crowd of Islamist extremists vandalized three churches in Central Java province on February 8. Two days earlier, three people from the Ahmadiyya minority community – considered a cult by Sunni clergy – were brutally battered to death by another mob in West Java province.

While “heretic” Islamic sects bear the brunt of Islamist extremism in many Muslim-majority countries, in Indonesia Christians are the main target. A civil society group, the Setara Institute for Democracy and Peace, recorded at least 75 incidents involving violations of religious freedom against the Christian community, and 50 against the Ahmadiyya sect in 2010.

More than the statistics, what worries the Setara Institute is that the extremist groups, otherwise seen as “fringe elements” having little influence apart from their involvement in street politics, have widened their support base and infiltrated a top Muslim body and political parties.

## Support Base

In a report released two months ago, the Setara Institute warned that the Islamic People's Forum, an extremist group locally known as the FUI, “attempted to widen its support significantly by holding a meeting of 200 influential clerics from across the archipelago” in 2008. One of those clerics, identified as Salim bin Umar Al Attas, is known to have over 10,000 followers. It added that the FUI was also running a radio show on a

station owned by a group of clerics in Bogor.

The report said some leaders of extremist groups, including FUI head Muhammad Al Khaththath, had infiltrated a key body of Islamic jurisprudence, the Indonesian Council of Ulema (MUI), which often issues edicts “forbidding religious pluralism, liberalism and secularism.” Al Khaththath, who became a Board member in 2005, was among those who “actively lobbied the MUI to issue an edict forbidding the practice of liberal Islam.”

President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono has unofficially endorsed the MUI’s religious authority, saying his administration will “embrace the views, recommendations and edicts of the MUI.”

While the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), another extremist group, and a few other outfits lead attacks on minorities and their institutions, the FUI concentrates mainly on lobbying and broadening the network among radical groups as well as the support base.

The 2006 Revised Joint Ministerial Decree on the Construction of Houses of Worship was promulgated after anti-minority edicts were issued by the MUI.

The decree, apparently targeting Christian churches, mandates religious groups to obtain the signatures of at least 90 members and 60 persons of other religious groups in the community, and approval from the local religious affairs office before they are granted permission to build a house of worship.

The decree has resulted in numerous instances of forced closure of churches, revocation and delays in issuing building permits, and also violent attacks.

### **State Connivance, Inaction**

The Setara Institute noted that the police were either directly responsible for or condoned at least 56 incidents of violations of religious freedom in

2010. Even district heads were responsible for 19 violations and sub-district chiefs for 17.

YouTube carries many videos showing mobs of extremists launching attacks on minorities while police are doing little more than looking on.

Policing is a prerogative of provincial authorities, but the Central Government cannot plead helplessness.

The report showed that the Central Government only reacted to situations that had already gotten out of hand – smaller incidents were left for regional authorities, which do not have the capacity to solve such problems, to deal with. Besides, 40 percent of the cases were related to conflicts that had been going on for years.

Local Christians complain that churches are attacked almost every week but such incidents are not being highlighted by the “sensitive” media.

### **State's Preoccupation**

The fact that the Indonesian government is flaunting the prospects of 7 percent economic growth this year while reeling under the worst-ever spell of religious intolerance, speaks volume about its priorities. More than the government's belief that economic advancement is sufficient to deal with religious extremism, it appears that President Yudhoyono does not want to take a political risk by dealing with rioters strictly.

The growing religious extremism can be termed as a constitutional crisis given the doctrine of Pancasila – five principles held to be inseparable and interrelated – on which the Constitution is based. While the first principle speak of the nation's belief in the one and only God, the other four deal with social justice, humanity, unity and democracy for all. Moreover, the official national motto of Indonesians Bhinneka Tunggal Ika (Unity in Diversity).

The increasing clout of the extremist groups – as evident in the passing of joint-parliamentary decrees (of which the 2006 decree on places of

worship is one), issuing of anti-minority edicts by the MUI, the culture of impunity in cases of violent attacks, extremist groups receiving support from popular clerics, and so on – coupled with State complicity and lack of action, is worrying not only the minorities but also a majority of citizens who are Muslim. But the government is in a denial mode. Religious Affairs Minister Suryadharma Ali recently told the media that “there were no religious conflicts during 2010.”

The country has witnessed the kind of religious mob violence commonly associated with Pakistan or Taliban-controlled areas of Afghanistan, noted an article in Asia Sentinel. “In addition, corrupt and politically motivated courts, seldom a venue for justice, have been wreaking their own kind of mayhem on behalf of the fundamentalist minority.”

The President needs to realize that his non-confrontational approach towards the extremists is only disrupting peace instead of establishing it. The government, if it has the will, can curb the alarming growth of extremism so that Indonesia stays on the path to democracy and pluralism.

The Central Government must ensure that authorities strictly implement existing laws concerning powers and responsibilities of local authorities in taking preventive measures when any disturbance of public order is apprehended as well as those dealing with incitement to violence or hate speeches.

Meanwhile, the legislature or a competent court should bring in more clarity on what constitutes crime under the 2006 decree and possibly amend it to address grievances of religious minorities.

The debate on which Indonesia will prevail – modern, business-oriented economy or an intolerant, quasi-Islamic state that enforces its will through mob rule and terror – among Indonesian citizens reveals that the President is losing people’s confidence. At least that should worry him.

The World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) Religious Liberty Commission (RLC) sponsors this WEA-RLC Research & Analysis Report to help

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