

## New hope for Indonesia's ethnic minorities

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During the past decade attacks on religious minorities have cast a shadow over Indonesia's reputation as a tolerant and moderate Muslim-majority nation. Across the archipelago Christian, Buddhist, Ahmadi and Shi'ite communities have been exposed to increasing levels of discrimination, harassment, intimidation and violence, largely at the hands of Sunni hardliners.



On 29 May 2014, seven people were injured during attacks on a Catholic prayer service in Sleman, Yogyakarta. In June 2014, stone-throwing Sunni hardliners attacked a nearby church claiming it did not have a building permit. On 4 August 2013, a bomb exploded in a Buddhist temple in Jakarta, injuring three people. The following day Molotov cocktails were thrown into the yard of a Catholic high school in Jakarta.

Some of the most ferocious attacks have been directed at Indonesia's Ahmadi and Shi'ite communities. On 6 February 2011, an angry crowd in Cikeusik, Banten, murdered three Ahmadi men while a local policeman looked on. On 29 August 2012, more than 1000 Sunni villagers attacked a Shi'ite community on Madura Island, off the northeast coast of Java, burning homes and killing two people. The villagers were forced to seek refuge in a local stadium where they remained in temporary shelters for 10 months. On 20 June 2013, Sunni groups and religious leaders staged a mass protest to rid the stadium of the 'blasphemers', forcing the desperate leader of the Shi'ite community to agree to relocate the community to a town two hours away on the island of Java.

[Rising intolerance](#) <sup>[1]</sup> toward religious minorities in Indonesia is a product of the spread of Sunni takfiri (extremist) ideologies, as well as the increasing activism of Sunni hardliners in Indonesia's democratic politics. State laws and regulations also facilitate intolerance and religiously motivated violence.

Indonesia's constitution guarantees freedom of religion but a range of national and local laws undercut the constitutional safeguard and provide a cover for religious bullies. The primary legal enabler of abuse against religious minorities is the 1965 Presidential Decree on the Prevention of Religious Abuse and/or Defamation (Blasphemy Law) which defines and criminalises 'deviant' religious practices. The Blasphemy Law remains in place despite the fact that Indonesia ratified the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) <sup>[2]</sup> in 2005.

Indonesia's highest Muslim clerical body, the Ulama Council, has also become increasingly active in identifying 'deviant' behaviour and issuing fatwas. On 21 January 2012 the Ulama Council of East Java declared that Shi'ism itself was blasphemous. This prompted a gubernatorial decree that imposed penalties on anyone who 'propagates blasphemous teaching'. The decree effectively legitimised violence against the Shi'ite community.

The preceding administration of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY) was routinely criticised for its failure to protect the rights and welfare of Indonesia's religious minorities. At times the SBY government even appeared to encourage intolerant behaviour. In 2006 a Joint Ministerial Decree established the Inter-religious Harmony Forum, a council of religious leaders whose job was to facilitate the permit process for places of worship, but mounting evidence suggests that the Forum often hindered applications for Christian church permits.

More provocatively, in 2008 the government announced a Joint Ministerial Decree restricting Ahmadiyah activities outside of Ahmadi communities. SBY also appointed religious conservative ministers to parliament. They included Gamawan Fauzi, the minister for home affairs, who suggested relocating minorities rather than bringing their intimidators to justice, and Suryadharma Ali, the minister for religious affairs, who publicly declared that Ahmadi and Shi'ites were heretics.

Hopes are now high among religious minorities that Indonesia's new President, Joko Widodo (Jokowi), will restore Indonesia's reputation as a tolerant and pluralistic Muslim majority nation. Jokowi has a record of taking [a pluralistic approach](#) <sup>[3]</sup>. As governor of Jakarta, he defended a Christian district head when radical Muslims attacked her credentials. He was also known for his close working relationship with his deputy governor, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, who is Christian and of Chinese descent. Significantly, in his 2014 presidential campaign Jokowi identified 'intolerance and crisis in the nation's character' as one of the three main challenges facing Indonesia.

Jokowi's pluralism and religious tolerance are demonstrated through his political support base. He is backed by secular pluralist parties, such as the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle and the National Democratic Party, and pluralistic Islamic scholars. He is also backed by the National Awakening Party, which is closely affiliated with the largest [moderate Islamic](#) <sup>[4]</sup> organisation in Indonesia — Nahdlatul Ulama.

Although Jokowi has yet to make any public statements on the question of religious minority rights, at the end of 2014 his newly appointed Minister for Religious Affairs, Lukman Hakim Saifuddin, announced plans for new laws to protect religious communities. This is a promising step but, unless the 1965 Blasphemy Law is rescinded, it is unclear how much impact the new

law will have.

It also remains to be seen whether Jokowi will be able to shepherd such a law through Indonesia's rambunctious parliament. With only 37 per cent support in the parliament, passing any legislation will be difficult for Jokowi. And there is no sign that the protection of religious minorities will be a legislative priority. The minister's bill could languish for years. It will be even more difficult for the Jokowi administration to deal with the often discriminatory Sharia-based by-laws passed by regional governments.

If Jokowi believes that 'intolerance and crisis in the nation's character' is one of the biggest problems the country is facing, it is not yet clear how he plans to solve it.

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[1] Rising intolerance:

<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2012/06/20/religious-intolerance-and-law-reform-challenges-in-indonesia-2/>

[2] International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights:

<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2010/10/09/universal-human-rights-cultural-relativism-and-the-asian-values-debate/>

[3] a pluralistic approach:

<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2015/04/20/the-quest-for-asian-pluralism/>

[4] moderate Islamic:

<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2011/10/28/moderate-islam-in-southeast-asia-and-egypt/>

[5] East Asia Forum Quarterly: <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/quarterly/>

[6] Asia's  
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<http://press.anu.edu.au/titles/east-asia-forum-quarterly/volume-7-number-1-2015/>