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Religious Intolerance in Indonesia

Overview

Indonesia is the world's most populous Muslim-majority country, and it has long been known for its moderate interpretations of Islam. Yet, in recent years, there have been numerous acts of religious intolerance directed against minority religious groups in the country, including Ahmadis, a Muslim sect. This sort of intolerance gained international attention in December 2016 when over 200,000 protestors descended on Jakarta, Indonesia's capital, to demand that the city's governor, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, resign. They accused Basuki, otherwise known as Ahok, of blasphemy because he had suggested that his political opponents were using a Quranic verse to encourage Muslims to vote against non-Muslims. (Ahok is a double minority in Indonesia: he is a Christian and ethnically Chinese.) Months later, Ahok lost his reelection bid; he also was charged with blasphemy, convicted, and sentenced to two years in prison.

The sentence shocked many Southeast Asia observers. After the demonstrations, some of them began to question Indonesia's reputation for religious tolerance. They pointed to an uptick in the number of attacks and discriminatory practices aimed at minorities, and noted that Islamist groups' political influence seemed to be increasing. Previously, these groups had limited influence in national politics, and secular parties dominated national elections. Secular parties still are the most powerful ones in the country, but given the success of the anti-Ahok demonstrations, Islamist groups and hardline rhetoric may have an unprecedented impact on the upcoming 2019 general elections. Some observers argue that even some mainstream political figures have become more inclined to use religious intolerance to shore up political support.

Several factors may be contributing to the more-mainstream acceptance of hardline interpretations of Islam, including the country's Islamic schools, funding from the Persian Gulf region, and the Indonesian government's policies.

Background

Indonesia's population is over 260 million, comprising Muslims (87.2%), Protestants (7.0%), Roman Catholics (2.9%), and Hindus (1.7%). Many Indonesian Muslims worship local spirits and deities, in addition to practicing their Islamic faith. The country's constitution protects religious freedom, but in recent years, studies have found that religious intolerance is increasing. In 2017, an Indonesian NGO, the Setara Institute, reported that "acts of religious intolerance" increased between 2015 and 2016—from 236 acts to 270. That same year, the Jakarta-based Center for the Study of Islam and Society polled Indonesian high-school and university students; almost 90% of respondents said that the government should ban heretical

groups. While some Indonesian polls are considered unreliable, their findings have been borne out by qualitative accounts. In 2016, Sidney Jones, the director of the Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict (IPAC), noted that "a more conservative, more intolerant atmosphere" has gradually emerged in the country.

Muslim Groups in Indonesia

In Indonesia, there are several hardline Islamist groups. One is known as the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI). It was founded in 1998—according to some, with the backing of the military and police—and it has an estimated 200,000 members. The group has engaged in vigilante-style violence. It has closed down nightclubs and bars during Ramadan, and it was a driving force behind the anti-Ahok protests. Another group, Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI), was involved in the anti-Ahok protests as well. The group is part of a wider, transnational organization, and seeks to establish a caliphate through non-violent means. It has tens of thousands of members in Indonesia. According to IPAC, it has a "strong presence on university campuses," and is "committed to the infiltration of government and security forces, so that Islamic governance can be achieved from within." The Indonesian government banned HTI in 2017.

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Indonesia's two largest Islamic organizations, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, are considered more moderate. Both have deep religious and political influence, largely because of their size. NU has an estimated 40 million members; Muhammadiyah has about 30 million. NU and Muhammadiyah have roots in many smaller religious and civic organizations across the country, and they have been involved in efforts to combat militant interpretations of Islam in Indonesia. But some are worried that grassroots elements within both groups—and NU especially—are becoming more conservative. (Historically, NU has been the more moderate of the two.) According to William Liddle, a political scientist at Ohio State University, "during and since President [Abdurrahman] Wahid"—who headed NU before becoming Indonesia's president in 1999—"the impression that moderates dominate NU has never been accurate."

Foreign Influence

For decades, Saudi Arabia, along with its neighbors, has funded schools and programs to spread Salafist-Islamic thought in Indonesia. (Persian Gulf funding comes from government and nongovernment sources, including wealthy

individuals.) According to Krithika Varagur, a Jakarta-based writer, “Saudi Arabia has, for decades, been making investments” in Indonesia, and has created an infrastructure, including universities and scholarships, “aimed at influencing Indonesian culture and religion.”

In 1980, Saudi Arabia established the Islamic-Arabic Sciences Institute (LIPIA) in Jakarta. It is an all-expenses-paid university and a branch of the Imam Muhammed ibn Saud University in Riyadh. Many of its faculty members are Saudi Salafis, and its curriculum focuses on the teachings of Muhammed ibn Abd al Wahhab, the 18th century theologian whose partnership with the Al Saud family provided the basis for the first kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Al Wahhab’s writings describe Muslims who incorporate local customs into their religious practices as “apostates.” As of 2016, about 3,500 LIPIA students graduated each year. Saudi Arabia also has built 150 mosques in the country (out of about 800,000 in total), and has offered scholarships for Indonesian students to study at the Kingdom’s universities. One of these students, Habib Rizieq, later founded the FPI.

Religious Schools

According to some scholars, religious schools also have led to a more “homogenized” and conservative interpretation of Islam in Indonesia. This development has, in large part, been driven by two factors—the public school system and Indonesia’s Islamic schools. From the 1960s to the late 1990s, the authoritarian Suharto regime controlled Indonesia, and expanded the state education system to impose greater social order on the country. Religious instruction was a mandatory part of the curriculum, and ultimately contributed to “a more uniformly Islamic population,” according to Liddle. The public schools were nominally free, but many charged informal fees. These fees still exist today, and are too expensive for some families, who send their children to cheaper Islamic schools, such as *madrassahs*. The *madrassahs* generally teach a more fundamentalist version of Islam.

The vast majority of Islamic schools in Indonesia, including *madrassahs*, do not disseminate radical interpretations of Islam. But a few do, such as al-Mukmin, which was established by Abu Bakar Ba’asyir, a founder of the terrorist group Jemaah Islamiyah (JI). (The Saudis reportedly helped to fund al-Mukmin in 1972.) Several of the school’s graduates were involved in the JI-orchestrated Bali bombings in 2002. That said, most Indonesian Islamists eschew violence, but they do see education as a way to shape the debate about Islam’s role in Indonesian society. According to IPAC, Bachtiar Nasir, one the organizers of the anti-Ahok protests, seeks “to mold a new generation of young people into pious, capable Muslim leaders who can compete in future elections.” He has established an Islamic center with a 500-student school.

Government Actions

The Indonesian government, at times, has seemed to tilt toward the Islamists, in part to appeal to an electorate that has been “open to Islam playing a central role in law and governance,” according to Shadi Hamid. In 2005, the

country’s former President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY) spoke before the Ulama Council, a grouping of Indonesian Islamic organizations, including the FPI and NU. He said that the government “should heed the fatwas from [the council] and *ulamas*.” The fatwas have no legal standing, but SBY essentially made the council the arbiter of Islamic religious matters. Moreover, some secular institutions in Indonesia, such as the military and police, reportedly are becoming more religious.

Current President Joko Widodo (or Jokowi) has challenged the Islamists. He has condemned religious intolerance, and 5 of his 34 cabinet members are from minority faiths. Yet, in August 2018, Jokowi named Ma’aruf Amin, an influential NU cleric who heads the Ulama Council, as his Vice-Presidential nominee. It likely was an attempt to preempt suggestions that Jokowi is not a Muslim ahead of the 2019 elections. Those same charges were made during the 2014 campaign, and likely narrowed Jokowi’s margin of victory. (He is a Javanese Muslim.)

Some argue that democratization has been a boon for Indonesian Islamists and Salafis. Democracy “has been a godsend for Salafis,” suggests Din Wahid, an expert on Indonesian Salafism. “They are now free to propagate their ideas ... in the open, even though Salafis reject democratic values that protect ... minorities’ rights.” Some Indonesian Islamists see democracy as a type of government, not as a set of values. As Bachtiar reportedly said, “Islam accepts democracy but the question is, does democracy accept Islam? We’re the majority, therefore, according to democratic principles, we should be the ones who determine the law.”

Indonesian and U.S. Responses

Indonesia’s government has established programs to counter violent extremism, but it has struggled to combat the influence of Islamists. It has been reluctant to push back against the Gulf States and Saudi Arabia, in particular, because it does not want Riyadh to cut its hajj quota, which is the annual number of Muslims from each country allowed to make the hajj (or pilgrimage) to Mecca. That said, in July 2017, Jokowi signed a presidential decree, allowing the government to ban groups that threaten national unity. Some U.S. policymakers also have been concerned about rising religious conservatism in Indonesia. In 2010, the United States and Indonesia inaugurated a Comprehensive Partnership; one of its goals was to establish “bridges” between different faiths. The United States has funded programs to promote religious tolerance in Indonesia for decades. In 2017, Search for Common Ground began implementing a State Department-funded program aimed at “reinstating the values and norms of pluralism within state institutions, youth, and local communities in Indonesia.”

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