

Religious Tension in Indonesia - Tolerance No More

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Indonesia has the biggest Muslim population in the world and is often described as a country where people live peacefully side by side, tolerating difference. In reality, however, the targeting of religious minorities has been on the increase for years. By Andy Budiman

Indonesia's brand of Islam is often portrayed by women wearing headscarves smiling in friendly fashion or children playing in front of a mosque. Almost 90 per cent of the island state's 240 million inhabitants are Muslim.

However, this positive image of a country where different communities and cultures interact peacefully with each other contrasts heavily with the reality of the past ten years.

In recent years, there has been an increase in attacks on religious minorities. In mid-February 2013, three churches in South Sulawesi Province were attacked with Molotov cocktails. Last year, a Christian congregation in Bekasi on the outskirts of the capital Jakarta was temporarily forced to pray on the streets because they were not able to use their church after it had been bombarded with bags containing human faeces and urine.

Tension within religious communities

However, it is not only Indonesia's Christians who fear the rise in violence. There has also been an increase in violent attacks against the country's Muslim minorities. "Studies show that tensions within one religious community are much greater than between religious groups," says Novriantoni Kahar, director of the Indonesia Tanpa Diskriminasi foundation (Indonesia without Discrimination), which carries out



research on intolerance.

A poll conducted in late 2012 found that over 40 per cent of those surveyed would not want Shias or members of the Ahmadi community living in their neighbourhood – although both are Muslim groups – in comparison to 15.1 per cent who said they did not want Christians or Hindus as their neighbours.

Discrimination against Ahmadis

The vast majority of Indonesia's 200 million Muslims are Sunnis. There are an estimated 100,000 Shias and 400,000 Ahmadis. The Ahmadi community is a religious group that emerged on the Indian subcontinent at the end of the nineteenth century. They consider themselves to be devout Muslims. However, the movement was excluded from the Muslim community just under 40 years ago, and its members are viewed with suspicion and mistrust or are even persecuted in many countries.

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