



Indonesia



Barnabas supports this church-planting couple in Indonesia

Sewage, rotten eggs and sticks were hurled at a Christian congregation as they gathered for an outdoor service. On 20 May 2012, a mob of 400 angry Islamists in Bekasi, West Java, tried to stop members of the Filadelfia Batak Christian Protestant Church (HKBP) from reaching their meeting-place. The members had at that time been gathering outside for over 18 months after their building was sealed off by local authorities. It remained shut even after the Supreme Court ruled that the church should be given a building permit a year earlier.

More Muslims live in Indonesia than in any other country. But although they number approximately 87 per cent of the population, they live alongside a sizeable Christian community, estimated at well over 20 million, whose history goes back to the 16th century. For many decades Indonesia, a country founded on the doctrine of Pancasila, which includes a commitment to national unity, was a model of equality and harmonious relations between different religious groups.

But in the last years of the 20th century a massive campaign of violence against Christians was launched by Islamists intent on bringing the whole country under sharia law. According to some estimates, Central Sulawesi and the Maluku Islands saw 30,000 Christians killed and half a million driven out during these years. The appalling bloodshed of this time has not recurred on the same scale, but Islamists still wield considerable power and influence.

Indeed pressure, intimidation and violence from hard-line Muslim groups against the Christian minority have increased since 2008. One militant group, the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), has become particularly aggressive. Islamists regularly pressurise local authorities to refuse building permits to churches, and local authorities frequently give in and cooperate with them. Police often allow them to commit violence with impunity or even collaborate with them. In 2012, at least 45 places of Christian worship were closed down by local authorities in the province of Aceh owing to pressure from Islamists.

The central government respond with mixed messages. Sometimes they call for tolerance and condemn intimidation of Christians. But in recent years they have twice failed to enforce Supreme Court decisions in favour of churches receiving building permits after local authorities refused to act on them. The government has also detained and imprisoned Christians under the 1965 blasphemy law for expressing their opinions and Christian beliefs. Various other laws also impede evangelism and the construction of churches.

Sharia law is officially permitted in the Indonesian province of Aceh, and sharia courts are active there. Many other local governments in Muslim-majority areas also attempt to implement sharia-inspired regulations, some of which discriminate against Christians. The authorities have encouraged Muslims to migrate into Christian-majority areas; once they outnumber the Christians, they can press for the imposition of sharia.

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