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Religious Harmony in Indonesia: Need for New Approaches

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Synopsis

Religious intolerance continues to bedevil Indonesia. Although the Indonesian constitution is committed to protecting religious freedom, there are certain laws and official actions that do not. Policymakers need to be proactive to build education, political and law enforcement capabilities to deal with religious intolerance.

Commentary

INDONESIAN PRESIDENT Susilo Bambang Yudoyono's invocation of religious tolerance in his Independence Day Speech on 17 August 2013 was poignant in the light of the recent bombing of the Ekayana Buddhist Center in Jakarta two weeks earlier. While the media speculated about the possible terrorist motive of the bombing, the bigger concern for policy makers ought to be the persistence of religious intolerance in the country.

The Indonesian authorities echoed this fear. Following the bombing incident, the Chief of Police, General Timur Pradopo asked the people to remain calm and not be provoked by *SARA* – the local acronym referring to the four sensitive issues of ethnicity, religion, race and intergroup feelings.

Minorities face intolerance and opposition

While in general the Indonesian constitution and most laws and policies are committed to protecting religious freedom, there are certain laws and official actions that do not. For instance, in 2008, a decree banned proselytising activities by the Ahmadiyah believers while preventing vigilante acts against the group. In addition, the decree did not prohibit the conduct of worship or other practices within the Ahmadiyah community itself. However opposition from some factions continued. For example in 2011, the West Java Governor Ahmad Heryawan passed an order that banned all activities conducted by the Ahmadiyah community.

Meanwhile some Christian churches also faced opposition from the majority Muslim community and local leaders due to the 2006 regulation that apparently made it difficult for minority church groups to build places of worship. The regulation required the signatures of at least 90 members of the group in addition to 60 individuals of different religious groups in the community in support of the construction, besides the approval of the local religious affairs office.

The Taman Yasmin church in Bogor for example, had been battling a decision from the mayor denying the

legality of their building permit and had been closed since 2011. In addition, fundamentalist Islamic groups have jumped into the fray in some of these situations while police stood by.

For example, on January 2012, members of the Indonesian Muslim Communication Forum (Forkami) and the Islamic Reform Movement (Garis), harassed Taman Yasmin members who were conducting a church service at a member's house. In another instance in March 2013, the Batak Protestant Church (HKBP) Taman Sari church in Bekasi was demolished following opposition from the Taman Sari Islamic People's Forum (FUIT).

Furthermore, results from surveys confirm the rising discomfort that Indonesians have towards those of different religious backgrounds. A January 2013 study by the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) noted that 68 percent of its respondents disagreed to having a place of worship for other faiths in their neighbourhood. In 2012, a study by the reputable Indonesian Survey Circle (LSI) found that 15 percent of its respondents are wary of people of different religious backgrounds, an increase from eight percent in its 2005 study.

As an illustration, on 19 August 2013, some residents of Lenteng Agung subdistrict in South Jakarta petitioned for the removal of the newly installed subdistrict head owing to the fact that she is not Muslim.

Need to build proactive and reactive capacities

It is easy to see that the current worrying state of creeping religious intolerance can under certain conditions lead to violence. Thus there is a need for policymakers to build what Singaporean geographer Lily Kong describes as "proactive and reactive capacities" when addressing the problems of religious intolerance in Indonesia.

There is need to anticipate religious adversities and harness religion for social well-being. Policymakers should also think about the ways to limit the damage from religious adversity. The building of proactive and reactive capacities in the Indonesian religious context requires other initiatives:

First, reform in the area of religious education in schools: Education officials already recognise the possible linkage between violence across the archipelago and shortcomings in the Indonesian education system. To address this issue, curriculum reform was implemented in June 2013 that removed the teaching of Science, English and Information Technology in order to dedicate more time to religious studies.

However, the new curriculum needs to incorporate interfaith teaching of religion. It should also expose students to the fact that the religious landscape in Indonesia, and all over Southeast Asia, is largely characterised by religious diversity. Such reforms in the religious education system are more likely to improve inter-religious understanding and tolerance in the long-run.

Political will to enforce guarantee

Second, there is a need for political will. Indonesian leaders should enforce the constitutional guarantee for religious freedom in the country. This is especially so in the regions, where the central government in Jakarta has been unable to interfere with, given the authority of regional officials as outlined in the 2004 Regional Administration Law. This is best illustrated in the case of Taman Yasmin church, whereby the Bogor Mayor refused to obey 2010 ruling by the Supreme Court to allow the congregation to hold services at the church.

Finally, there is a need for training. Law enforcement authorities need to improve training in view of their increasing involvement in situations involving inter-religious conflicts. Training academies should consider incorporating teachings on interfaith religious studies in their curriculum as well as practical knowledge on preparing officers for deployment to situations of religious conflicts or violence.

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