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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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## **Ahmadiyahs in Indonesia: Between Sensitivity and Diversity**

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*The recent controversy over the calls for the banning of the Ahmadiyah sect in Indonesia has triggered opposing reactions. Some have argued this to reflect the growing conservative outlook of Indonesians. While such a view may be naïve, there could be some reason for concern.*

### **Controversies Surrounding the Ahmadiyah Sect**

THE AHMADIYAH sect was founded in 1889 by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, a preacher from the village of Qadian in Punjab, India. The followers of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad are commonly known as the Ahmadiyahs or Qadianis. The main controversy surrounding the Ahmadiyah is Ghulam Ahmad's claim that he was the Imam Mahdi (Messiah) whose advent was foretold by Prophet Muhammad and had come to save the world. Later, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad declared himself as a prophet and was denounced by mainstream Muslims as heretical. Other aspects, such as the Ahmadiyah's belief that the leadership of the Muslims would transfer to 'Caliphs', seen as successors to Ghulam Ahmad, were viewed controversial by mainstream Muslims.

Upon the death of first successor of Ghulam Ahmad, Hakeem Noor-Ud-Din, the movement split into two. The key issue of contention between the two groups is over the Finality of Prophethood. All Muslims believe that Prophet Muhammad is the seal of all the prophets and no other prophets would come after him. This view is shared by one of the Ahmadiyah groups commonly known as the Lahore Ahmadiyah Movement. They regarded Ghulam Ahmad as a *mujaddid*, a "reviver" of Islam, and insisted he never claimed prophethood. However most Muslim scholars noted that Ghulam Ahmad did claim prophethood in several of his writings and thus rejected this view. There is little doubt that the Ahmadiyah beliefs contradicted significantly with traditional Muslim doctrines. As such, it is not surprising that mainstream Muslims do not see the Ahmadiyahs as being part of the Muslim community.

### **Ahmadiyahs in Pakistan**

Despite being seen as a deviationist movement, the Ahmadiyahs were never historically prosecuted. In fact, Ahmadiyahs were prominent leaders of Indian Muslims and many led the movement for the

formation of Pakistan. One such leader is Sir Zafarullah Khan, the first foreign minister of Pakistan who was an Ahmadiyyah. The Ahmadiyyahs became the centre of attention after Islamists led by Moulana Abul A'la Maududi, leader of the Jamaat-e-Islami, organized a campaign for the Ahmadiyyahs to be declared as non-Muslims. In his famous book, *The Qadiani Problem*, Maududi deconstructed the teachings of Ahmadiyyah utilizing sources from Islamic tradition. He made a convincing case that Ahmadiyyahs should be declared as a non-Muslim group. By 1974, the secular government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto enacted laws labelling the Ahmadiyyahs as non-Muslims.

Following the example of Pakistan, many other Muslim countries decided to declare the Ahmadiyyahs as a non-Muslim group. This meant that the Ahmadiyyahs were often buried in separate burial ground and had to build a separate place of worship. In 1984, following pressures from Muslim fundamentalist groups, the military regime of General Zia ul Haq strengthened the laws of 1974 to ban Ahmadiyyahs or Lahori Ahmadiyyahs from calling themselves Muslims or using terminologies associated with Islam. In 1986, a blasphemy law was enacted whereby a person charged with defiling Prophet Muhammad could be hanged. It is obvious that the laws were targeted at the Ahmadiyyahs.

### **Ahmadiyyah in Indonesia**

It is interesting to note that the current developments in Indonesia are similar to that in Pakistan in the 1980s. The Ahmadiyyahs have had a long history in Indonesia. It was believed that they set foot in Indonesia as early as 1930s. Yet, it was not until 1980 that the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI) issued a *fatwa* (religious decree) declaring the Ahmadiyyah as a deviationist group. Given the authoritarian nature of General Suharto's regime, MUI could not push for its *fatwa* to be implemented. In 2005, MUI issued another *fatwa* reaffirming its earlier *fatwa*. Since 2007, MUI has worked closely with other Islamic organizations such as the Indonesian Muslim Forum (FUI) to call for the banning of the Ahmadiyyah.

This time, they are calling for its outright ban. It is likely that with the 2009 presidential elections looming, the Indonesian government under President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono would move to ban the Ahmadiyyah to please Islamist groups perceived to be growing in numbers and strength in recent times. Banning the Ahmadiyyah would also enhance the Islamic image of the Indonesian government amongst some Muslims in Indonesia

### **The Road Ahead**

While many Muslims would agree with the decision to declare Ahmadiyyahs as non-Muslims, a decision to ban the group clearly contravene Islam's respect for the right of others to practise their religious beliefs. The Pakistani example should act as an important lesson to the Indonesian government. Secular leaders such as Bhutto had thought that allowing the Ahmadiyyah could serve their political end. Yet, he unwittingly unleashed the Islamist tide resulting in calls for the banning of the *Shiites* and other minority groups. This resulted in the unintended consequence of strengthening the Islamists and radicalising the Pakistani society.

Similarly in Indonesia, Islamist groups may be using the Ahmadiyyah issue to gain political mileage. It is unlikely that Islamist groups would gain ground or power through democratic means given the low support for Islamist politics. This was manifested by the decision of Islamist parties like the Prosperity Justice Party (PKS) to moderate its Islamic message to remain relevant. As such, they are likely to capitalise on these issues to enhance their image and gain political influence. For the Indonesian government, a ban on the Ahmadiyyah would be setting a precedent. Similar to Pakistan, it is likely that Islamist groups would call for other religious beliefs to be probed for insulting Islam. Such a move would also not be in keeping with Indonesia's religious diversity.

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