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Politics, Plurality and Inter-Group Relations

Addressing Religious Intolerance in Indonesia

By Alexander R Arifianto

Synopsis

The increasing number of violent incidents against religious minorities in recent years is a growing concern in Indonesia. A workshop was recently held in Jakarta to discuss the challenges of rising religious intolerance in Indonesia and recommended some remedies to address it.

Commentary

RELIGIOUS GROUPS in Indonesia have been victims of violent attacks in recent years. Religious minorities in Indonesia, such as Buddhists, Christians, Shiites and Ahmadis have been targeted by Muslim vigilante groups. However, Muslims also have become victims of intolerant acts in provinces when they are not in the majority, for instance, in Tolikara, Papua where Christian mobs attacked a number of mosques in July 2015.

On 25 August 2016, the RSIS Indonesia Programme hosted a workshop entitled “The Rise of Religious Intolerance in Contemporary Indonesia” in Jakarta to discuss the reasons why religious intolerance is becoming a growing problem in post-*Reformasi* Indonesia. Participants were scholars of religious intolerance in Indonesia and activists, representing mainstream Indonesian Islamic organisations Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, and representatives of Indonesian Ahmadi and Shiite communities.

Causes of Rising Religious Intolerance

Papers presented at the conference discussed a number of causes of rising religious

intolerance in Indonesia. Ahmad Najib Burhani, a keynote speaker from the Indonesian Institute of Sciences (LIPI), attributed it to the effect of economic globalisation, which creates economic uncertainty for many religious believers. Furthermore, it creates tensions and mistrust among themselves and other religious communities.

Other speakers noted several trends regarding religious intolerance in Indonesia. For instance, there is an increasing usage of the civilian court system by conservative religious groups to persecute activists representing religious minorities, by accusing them of violating Indonesia's 1965 blasphemy law. In addition, more local edicts (*peraturan daerah* or *perda*) were issued that encourage discrimination against religious minorities.

Examples of such edicts include a decree by the governor of East Java that prohibits Shi'a Islam within his province. In addition, a circular signed by the mayor of Bogor last year prohibits Shiites from celebrating the Ashura holiday within the city.

Ironically, both leaders were initially considered as moderate Muslims with progressive ideas. However, they were forced to issue these edicts to appease conservative Islamic groups which dominated local politics. The growing influence of these groups forced them into an alliance in order to secure their re-election prospects and protect their political power and patronage.

In addition, there is a concern over growing radicalism among Indonesian Muslims, particularly among university-age young adults. This is highlighted by a newly released survey conducted by the NU-affiliated Wahid Foundation stating that 49 percent of its respondents hold intolerant attitudes toward religious minorities and 7.7 percent are willing to commit violent actions against them. Even moderate Islamic groups such as NU also face the threat of increasing radicalism among some of its members, who have openly challenged its promotion of the moderate Islam Nusantara theology in Indonesia.

Representatives of religious minority communities expressed their concerns that they do not receive state protection against attacks from radical groups, despite the religious freedom guarantee enshrined in Indonesia's national ideology Pancasila. They accused the security apparatus of siding with the perpetrators instead of protecting them. They also pointed out that intolerant incidents against their groups only increased after the 1998 *Reformasi* with the more democratic and decentralised Indonesian state.

Addressing Intolerance: Some Recommendations

Workshop participants also recommended a number of potential remedies to address the problem. The first is a more inclusive classification of which groups should be considered as religious communities entitled to state protection. Such a definition is included in a bill currently drafted by the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs entitled the Religious Harmony Bill (*RUU Kerukunan Beragama*).

It defines a religious group to include not just officially recognised religions such as Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, but also locally based

spiritual streams (*aliran kepercayaan*), which would receive recognition as groups that are entitled to state protection. In the Suharto era, moves to officially recognise *aliran kepercayaan* was opposed by mainstream Muslims who did not consider it as religion.

The second recommendation is to encourage more interaction between representatives of Muslim community and religious minorities. Opinion surveys have consistently shown that the level of religious tolerance increases as members of a religious group develop friendship networks with other religious groups. Unfortunately, members of different religious groups tend to live separately in Indonesia and do not have regular interactions with each other. To resolve this, the state needs to encourage more interfaith dialogue and cooperation between different religious groups.

The third recommendation is for the national government to reassert its role as a neutral arbiter of religious disputes as directed by the Indonesian constitution. The government should be firm in protecting all religious groups equally and punishing any radical groups irrespective of their religious affiliation.

It should also cancel any local *perda* that were enacted to promote discrimination against any religious minorities, as the constitution gives the national government the sole authority to regulate religious affairs in Indonesia. Lastly, it should restore the rights of religious minorities that were curtailed under such regulations, for example, by granting them the right to apply for national identity cards (KTP) that would assure them access to public services.

Religious intolerance in Indonesia endangers the country's pluralist and inclusive foundation as enshrined in the Pancasila. It is perpetuated as consequences of rapid economic globalisation, increased religious radicalism, and the failure of national and local governments to protect religious minorities. The state should commit to protecting all religious groups equally when facing persecution from another group. It needs to assure that all religious groups receive the same protection accorded to them as Indonesian citizens.

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