

KEY FINDINGS

In 2018, the overall religious freedom conditions in Indonesia trended negative. Although the number of religious freedom violations committed by state actors decreased in 2018, the Indonesian government continued to enforce several laws and policies that imposed significant obstacles to religious freedom, such as draconian blasphemy laws and an arduous approval process for the construction of new houses of worship. The national government frequently does not intervene when provincial and local governments enact unconstitutional regulations or policies that exacerbate religious divisions. For example, in late 2018, the government released a mobile phone application that provides citizens the ability to report on “deviant” religious practices, creating panic among Indonesia’s religious minorities and underscoring the risks of acceding to pressure from hardliners and other intolerant groups. Moreover, there has been little effort to rein in hardliners and other intolerant groups that commit acts

of discrimination and violence against members of certain faiths. There were increased signs of radicalization in 2018, particularly in Indonesia’s education system. Candidates in the 2018 regional elections appealed to religious sectarianism, raising fears about the politicization of religion ahead of the April 2019 general elections. Violations of religious freedom tended to have the greatest impact on Ahmadiyya and Shi’a Muslims, Christians, believers outside the six officially recognized faiths, and nonbelievers. In October 2018, a USCIRF delegation visited Indonesia to assess religious freedom conditions.

In 2019, USCIRF again places Indonesia on its Tier 2, where it has been since 2004, for engaging in or tolerating religious freedom violations that meet at least one of the elements of the “systematic, ongoing, egregious” standard for designation as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA).

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Direct the U.S. Embassy in Jakarta and the U.S. Consulates in Indonesia to urge the Indonesian government at the central, provincial, and local levels to repeal or amend laws that violate religious freedom, including but not limited to: the blasphemy law and related measures; a regulation on houses of worship; a decree banning Ahmadiyya members from spreading their faith; and requirements to name religious affiliation on ID cards;
- Prioritize funding for programs that improve the capacity of civil society and the media to collect, investigate, and clarify provocative information relating to religion that appears online or in text messages;
- Focus U.S. government funding for deradicalization efforts in Indonesia on teachers, students, and school administrators, particularly in Islamic boarding schools; and
- Ensure that U.S.-funded programs for Indonesian police and counterterrorism officials incorporate training on addressing sectarian conflict, religion-related vigilantism, hate speech, and terrorism through practices consistent with international human rights standards.

COUNTRY FACTS

FULL NAME

Republic of Indonesia

GOVERNMENT

Presidential Republic

POPULATION

262,787,403

GOVERNMENT-RECOGNIZED RELIGIONS/FAITHS

Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism

RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY*

87.2% Muslim

7% Protestant

2.9% Catholic

1.7% Hindu

0.9% Other (includes Buddhist and Confucian)

0.4% Unspecified

*Estimates compiled from the CIA World Factbook

BACKGROUND

Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim-majority country, has a long tradition of religious pluralism. According to article 29 of its constitution, "The State guarantees the independence of each resident to embrace religion and worship according to their respective religions and beliefs." The government has promoted an ideology known as Pancasila, which comprises five principles: monotheism, civilized humanity, national unity, deliberative democracy, and social justice ("monotheism" broadly defined as any religion with a supreme deity, a prophet or holy figure, a scripture, and established rituals). However, the government officially recognizes only six religions: Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Confucianism.

Indonesia has a long history of interreligious conflict, from the Darul Islam insurgency in the 1950s that sought to establish an Islamic state to fighting between Christian and Muslim militias in Maluku during the early 2000s that killed more than 5,000 people and displaced 700,000. Even in the absence of armed conflict, hardliners and other intolerant groups have used religious appeals to provoke riots against certain religious minorities, sometimes causing physical injuries, destruction of property, and even fatalities. As such, many Indonesians have tended to prioritize interfaith harmony over religious freedom. The government claims many of the policies

that violate religious freedom, such as the criminalization of blasphemy and approval process for new houses of worship, are necessary to prevent conflict, but these laws and regulations often have the unintended effect of exacerbating interreligious tensions.

Although the country's largest Muslim organizations, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, remain committed to religious pluralism and the principles of Pancasila, since the country's transition to democracy in 1998 hardliners and other intolerant groups—such as the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) and the Indonesian Council of Ulema (MUI), the country's top Muslim clerical body—have called for increasingly conservative interpretations of Islam. This social undercurrent has been buttressed in part by Saudi investment and influence in Indonesia for decades, which, according to Indonesian academics and think tank experts, has brought a different, more austere form of Islam to the country. The current president, Joko Widodo (also known as "Jokowi"), generally has tried to distance the government from hardliners, an improvement over his predecessor, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (2004–2014).

According to KontraS, a local nongovernmental organization, the number of incidents of religious freedom violations in 2018 committed by state actors, including the police, decreased compared to previous years. While this trend is encouraging, the government

continued to enforce several laws and policies that impose significant obstacles to religious minorities practicing their faith. Moreover, the national government frequently does not intervene when provincial and local governments enact unconstitutional regulations or policies that exacerbate religious divisions. By contrast, there has been a marked increase in hate speech, intimidation, and violence against religious minorities committed by nonstate actors, such as vigilante groups and hardliner social movements. According to the Wahid Foundation, a local nongovernmental organization, police are now taking such violations more seriously, but some local authorities still struggle to define hate speech and remain impartial.

There is increasing concern about political opportunists exploiting religious tensions for electoral gain, especially after intolerant groups successfully used a blasphemy accusation to derail the reelection of Jakarta governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (also known as “Ahok”) in April 2017. In the June 2018 regional elections, gubernatorial candidates in West Kalimantan and North Sumatra provinces won by using religious appeals, and voting split largely along religious lines. Religious tensions in West Kalimantan did not erupt into serious violence in part because a group of civil society organizations and journalists worked to collect, investigate, and clarify provocative information relating to religion that appeared online or in text messaging.

In August, President Widodo chose Ma’ruf Amin, chair of the MUI and former chief advisor to NU, as his vice-presidential candidate, a move widely seen as an attempt to strengthen his Islamic credentials ahead of the April 2019 general elections. As part of the MUI, Amin signed intolerant *fatwas* (religious edicts), including against Ahmadiyya Muslims in 2005, and testified against Ahok in his politically charged blasphemy trial. However, since becoming a vice-presidential candidate, he has called for a more moderate form of Islam, condemned discrimination against religious minorities, and expressed regret over his testimony against Ahok. Meanwhile, FPI leader Rizieq Shihab, currently exiled in Saudi Arabia,

endorsed Jokowi’s opponent, former general Prabowo Subianto. In September, both presidential candidates pledged to avoid exploiting religious divisions while campaigning. However, on October 25, some of the same groups that mobilized against Ahok in 2016 and 2017 successfully pressured NU to cancel a rally in Yogyakarta after a member of its youth wing burned the flag of Hizb ut-Tahrir, an Islamist group banned by the Indonesian government. The protests were seen by some analysts as an indirect attack against Jokowi because of Amin’s affiliation with NU.

In October 2018, a USCIRF delegation traveled to Indonesia to meet with government officials, civil society leaders, and religious representatives in Jakarta, Surabaya, and Medan.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONDITIONS 2018

Blasphemy

Article 156(a) of Indonesia’s Criminal Code prohibits expression or acts “at enmity with, abusing, or staining a religion adhered to in Indonesia,” subject to a maximum penalty of up to five years’ imprisonment. The country has another blasphemy law issued by presidential decree (Law N. 1/PNPS/1965), which prohibits “deviant interpretation” of religious teachings.

After Indonesia’s transition to democracy, the number of prosecutions and convictions for blasphemy increased dramatically. During its October 2018 visit, USCIRF learned that 125 people were convicted for blasphemy under President Yudhoyono’s 10-year tenure; the number of new convictions decreased to 23 under the first four years of President Widodo’s presidency. The blasphemy law is frequently—but not exclusively—used to target religious minorities alleged to have insulted Islam. In 2018, six individuals were convicted of blasphemy

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and sentenced to prison, including Meiliana (who uses only one name), an ethnic Chinese Buddhist woman from Tanjung Balai, for a comment she made about the volume of the loudspeaker on a nearby mosque. On November 16, political opponents reported Grace Natalie, a Protestant and founder of the Indonesian Solidarity Party (PSI), to the police after she

criticized laws prohibiting “immoral acts” like gambling and drinking. At the end of the reporting period, she had not yet been formally charged with blasphemy. On January 24, 2019, after the reporting period, former Jakarta governor Ahok was released early from a prison sentence connected to his May 2017 conviction for blasphemy.

On July 23, 2018, the Constitutional Court rejected a petition challenging the constitutionality of the blasphemy law, declaring that the government could limit religious freedom in order to preserve public order (the third time the court has reaffirmed the law). The legislature is currently considering a Religious Rights Protection Bill, which would expand the legal definition of blasphemy to include acts like conversion between faiths and “tainting” holy books. It is not expected to act on the bill until after the April 2019 elections.

Houses of Worship

The 2006 Joint Regulation on Houses of Worship requires individuals seeking to establish a house of worship to submit the names of at least 90 congregation members, as well as signatures from at least 60 local households of a different faith, and then obtain recommendations from both the local government’s religious affairs office and the Religious Harmony Forum (FKUB), a council composed of local religious leaders. The regulation provides local governments the authority to close or tear down houses of worship built prior to 2006.

The 2006 regulation was intended to reduce tensions surrounding houses of worship, but in practice it has politicized their construction. Hardliners and other intolerant groups will often allege faulty or missing permits as justification to protest houses of worship and demand their closure. During its October 2018 visit, USCIRF learned that hardliners from outside the community will try to pressure local residents to oppose construction of new houses of worship by certain religious groups. Some smaller congregations cannot meet the signature threshold, so they are effectively prohibited from erecting any houses of worship. According to human rights groups, more than 1,000 churches have

been closed or prevented from being built in Indonesia since 2006. Far fewer state-sponsored closures of houses of worship have occurred under President Widodo, but local authorities still sometimes accede to the demands of hardliners. For example, on September 27, 2018, police sealed three churches in West Kenali village in Jambi Province that allegedly lacked the necessary permits after complaints from the local community.

Religious Sermons and Worship

Concerns about extremist rhetoric in houses of worship grew in 2018. In November, Indonesia’s national intelligence agency announced the results of an investigation into extremism in mosques, finding that as many as 500 mosques, including 41 connected to government institutions and state-owned enterprises, exposed worshippers to extremist ideologies. In May, the Ministry of Religious Affairs published a list—certified by the MUI—of the names of Islamic preachers “qualified” to give religious instruction. The government justified the list as necessary to counter radicalism, but Muslim groups argued that instead the government should blacklist extremists rather than endorse individual instructors. As of mid-2018, the list contained more than 500 preachers.

Some local governments have attempted to regulate religious sermons for political gain. On October 15, the Cianjur Regency government in West Java instructed local mosques that their Friday sermons should criticize the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) community.

During its October 2018 visit, USCIRF learned that some local governments—including Palembang, capital of South Sumatra Province, and Banten Province—have issued decrees requiring Muslim

civil servants to attend prayer services.

Education

In late 2018, the government began drafting a bill to regulate how schools and religious institutions teach religion. In November, Vice President Jusuf Kalla called upon universities to do more to counter radicalism and create a “curriculum of sermons” for campus mosques.

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These moves are partly in response to concerns about radicalization in the education sector. According to a survey released in October 2018 by Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University, nearly six in 10 Muslim teachers in both state and Islamic schools expressed intolerant attitudes toward other religions. Some of the more conservative Islamic schools do not permit students to interact with Christians or Jews. However, some religious schools, especially those affiliated with minority faiths, worried the proposed law would make it harder to obtain permission for peaceful educational activities like Sunday school and Bible classes.

Religion on ID Cards

The Indonesian government requires all citizens to list their religious affiliation on ID cards. This has made it more difficult for individuals who do not follow one of the country's six officially recognized faiths to obtain licenses and permits, access education and government jobs, and complete financial transactions. During its October 2018 visit, USCIRF spoke with members of other faiths, such as Ahmadis and Sikhs, and learned that they have to either falsely identify as one of the six recognized faiths or leave the religion field on their ID card blank, which not all local officials permit. In November 2017, the Constitutional Court declared that forcing followers of indigenous faiths to identify as Muslim, Catholic, Protestant, Buddhist, Hindu, or Confucian was unconstitutional. The MUI lobbied the Ministry of Home Affairs to list the phrase "Belief in one and only god" on the ID cards of followers of indigenous faiths rather than allow them to list their religion. As of late 2018, the Ministry decided that the legislature would have to review and amend the Indonesian Population Administration Law before it could include indigenous faiths on ID cards.

"Deviant" Groups

The quasi-governmental Indonesian Council of Ulema has issued *fatwas* declaring certain religious groups, including Ahmadiyya Muslims, Shi'a Muslims, and Gafatar, to be "deviant" and heretical to Islam.

In 2008, Islamic hardliners persuaded the government to issue a joint ministerial decree that bans Indonesia's 400,000 Ahmadiyya from spreading their faith, under a penalty of up to five years in prison. Some local and provincial governments, such as East Java,

have gone even further and banned all Ahmadi activities. Since 2008, local authorities have closed or violent protesters have vandalized more than 100 Ahmadiyya mosques. Intolerant groups have also attacked

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Ahmadiyya followers and their property. On May 19, 2018, a mob in the village of Grepek Tanak Eat, East Lombok Regency, torched at least eight houses, forcing seven Ahmadiyya families to leave their homes.

In 2018, public harassment of Indonesia's one to three million Shi'a Muslims continued. For years, authorities in certain localities, such as the city of Makassar, have prohibited them from commemorating Ashura in public. In 2012, 56 Shi'a Muslim houses in Sampang Regency, Madura, were burned down, forcing hundreds of survivors to flee to Surabaya; during USCIRF's October 2018 visit to Surabaya, the Commission learned that 346 Shi'a Muslims—or 83 households—remain internally displaced. Moreover, USCIRF heard that these displaced persons do not have access to a mosque qualified to conduct Shi'a Muslim religious rituals and cannot bury their dead in accord with their customs.

Formed in 2012, the Gerakan Fajar Nusantara movement, known as Gafatar, follows a syncretic blend of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. The group had attempted to form a commune in Kalimantan, but in January 2016 mob attacks forced 8,000 members to flee. In 2017, three of Gafatar's leaders were convicted of blasphemy. Throughout 2018, members continued to face persecution and pressure from the government and family members to recant their beliefs.

In November, Bakor Pakem, a body charged with religious oversight within the office of the Attorney General, launched a mobile phone application called "Smart Pakem" that allows members of the public to report on blasphemy, as well as on "misguided" religious

beliefs from a list that includes Ahmadiyya Muslims, Shi'a Muslims, and Gafatar. The independent National Commission on Human Rights criticized the app and said it possibly contravenes the Constitutional Court's 2017 decision on indigenous faiths.

Shari'ah Law

As part of a peace agreement ending a separatist insurgency in 2005, the Aceh provincial government has the authority to enact Shari'ah law. During its October 2018 visit, USCIRF learned that Aceh resumed public caning in July 2018, despite a previous pledge to carry out canings only inside prisons.

Although Aceh is the only region of Indonesia officially permitted to adopt Shari'ah law, as of early 2018 more than 100 Indonesian municipalities had implemented nearly 450 local Shari'ah regulations, often to appease local hardliners. Some of these laws disadvantage and discriminate against religious minorities by limiting their freedom to conduct certain activities openly.

Terrorism

On February 12, 2018, a man stabbed a Catholic priest and three others during Sunday mass at St. Lidwina Church in Yogyakarta. He also slashed statues of Jesus and the Virgin Mary. Counterterrorism officials suspected his actions were inspired by radical groups, which during the previous week had called for knife attacks in Indonesia.

On May 13, three churches in Surabaya—Immaculate Saint Mary Catholic Church, Indonesia Christian Church, and Surabaya Central Pentecost Church—were attacked by suicide bombers affiliated with Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD), a group with ties to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The bombs killed 15 people and injured 57. During a visit to one of the churches in October 2018, USCIRF met with church leaders and heard about the brave sacrifice several church members made to save both lives and property. Moreover, USCIRF heard about the thousands of Muslims who gathered after the bombings to protect churches throughout Surabaya. Indonesian officials suggested the bombings were a response to the imprisonment of JAD leader Aman Abdu-rrahman. The following week, the legislature amended the Terrorism Law to authorize law enforcement to preemptively arrest suspects for up to three weeks and to prosecute individuals who recruit for or join a terrorist

organization. Human rights groups expressed concerns that the law's vague wording could allow the government to crack down on any group seen as a threat, including peaceful activists. In June, the South Jakarta District Court banned JAD under the new law.

U.S. POLICY

In August 2018, Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo visited Indonesia, where he met with Minister for Foreign Affairs Retno Marsudi and [reaffirmed](#) the U.S.-Indonesia Strategic Partnership. As part of their defense relationship, the United States and Indonesia regularly engaged on matters such as counterterrorism and maritime security, as well as mutual interests in the South China Sea. After an earthquake and tsunami struck Central Sulawesi on September 28, President Donald J. Trump called Indonesian President Widodo to [express his condolences](#) to the victims and [provided](#) almost \$12 million in assistance for relief efforts. A State Department spokesperson [expressed condolences](#) on behalf of the United States for the victims of a tsunami that struck West Java and southern Sumatra on December 22. At the November 2018 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum, Vice President Michael R. Pence and President Widodo [agreed to promote](#) shared principles, values, and norms as part of the United States' commitment to a [free and open Indo-Pacific](#) based on Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) centrality.

The United States strongly [condemned](#) the May 13 church bombings in Surabaya. USAID Mission Director Erin E. McKee offered to provide the Indonesian government with assistance in its investigation. The U.S. State Department had in 2017 [designated](#) JAD as a "Specially Designated Global Terrorist" (SDGT). Four days after the attacks, Vice President Pence [met](#) with Kyai Haji Yahya Cholil Staquf, supreme leader of NU, at the White House to express his condolences.

In late 2018, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) [launched USAID/Indonesia Harmoni: Towards Inclusion and Resilience Activity](#), a four-year, \$20 million project designed to engage key Indonesian government, civil society, and education stakeholders to mitigate the risk of recruitment into violent extremist organizations and reintegrate reformed extremists into society.