

indonesia

PERSECUTION 101



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Tightening government regulations on religion combine with acts of extremism to make Indonesia a dangerous place for Christians and other religious minorities.

From blasphemy laws that criminalize minority religious thought to building codes that sometimes prevent new churches, the legal landscape in Indonesia is designed to favor the majority Sunni Muslim population over all other religious groups. Only six religions —Sunni Islam, Catholicism, Protestant Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Confucianism—are allowed to operate at all, and even then under an ever-tightening set of legal restrictions. In some parts of the country, extremist interpretations of Islam hold de facto sway over affairs, leading to attacks on Christians and others, inhibiting the ability of minorities to gather for worship, and creating an environment of religious repression that is difficult to quantify.

QUICK FACTS



Type of Government
Presidential
Republic

Head of Government
President Joko
Widodo

Total Population
Approx. 279.47 mil

Religious Demography
87.2% Muslim -243.7 mil
9.9% Christian - 27.66 mil
1.7% Hindu - 4.75 mil
1.2% other - 3.35 mil

Ethnic Demography
40.1% Javanese
15.5% Sudanese
3.7% Malay
3.6% Batak
3% Madurese
34.1% Other

TYPES OF PERSECUTION

Government Restrictions

Blasphemy laws, prohibitions on proselytization, Sharia law in one region, and a new national criminal code designed to promote conservative Islamic ideals leave little room for minority religious expression.

Religious Extremism

Local-level extremism continues to restrict Christians and others, leading to physical attacks and an inability for many minorities to freely participate as full members of society.



ICC IN INDONESIA

Many Indonesian Christians find themselves excluded from society and disadvantaged by a system designed to reduce protections for religious minority communities. More vulnerable to social boycotts, community pressure, and physical attacks in the first place, Christians in Indonesia also have fewer options for recovery in the aftermath of an incident of persecution.

Across Indonesia, ICC has been able to provide relief and development assistance to persecuted Christians. Targeted by their communities for their faith, beneficiaries often require help in establishing new livelihoods and ICC is able to come alongside and provide seed funding for new business endeavors like small grocery stores or coffee shops that promise years of sustained income.



Backgrounder on Religious Freedom in Indonesia

Known for containing the largest Muslim population in the world, Indonesia is also home to over thirty million members of other faiths. According to the U.S. Department of State, Papua, West Papua, East Nusa Tenggara, and North Sulawesi provinces are even majority Christian, while Bali is majority Hindu.

While these populations are not without protections—the Indonesian constitution ostensibly guarantees freedom of religion—there are also significant challenges for members of non-Muslim faith communities including some issues that only seem to be getting worse. Sadly, Indonesia's religiously pluralistic history seems to be fading in the face of new laws and practices hindering access to true religious freedom.

Of particular concern to human rights analysts was the government rehaul of the criminal code, signed into law in December of 2022. The changes, expected to be implemented over the next several years, intensify restrictions on religious speech and broaden the definition of blasphemy, further limiting the ability of religious minorities to openly express their beliefs. Updated for the modern day, the new criminal code expressly includes speech on social media within the scope of the prohibition on blasphemy.

Another update to the criminal code essentially makes it illegal to proselytize in a strangely worded prohibition of "inciting" another to change their faith. Punishable by up to two years in prison, this prohibition threatens to cast a significant chill on public and private evangelism, a practice central to the Christian faith.

Another longstanding issue for Indonesian Christians is gaining access to corporate worship. Indonesian law prohibits collective worship in private residences, but a permit to build a place of worship requires signatures from 90 members of the group, 60 signatures from members of other religious groups in the community, and approval from the local government-created interfaith council.



Predictably, this permitting process creates a significant barrier for Christian communities who often struggle for acceptance in their communities even without needing to obtain community support for their building project. In one province, the country's northeastern Aceh, authorities govern by Sharia law, creating a heightened sense of danger and vulnerability for Christian communities.

The difficulty with obtaining building permits highlights a broader problem in Indonesia—to the extent that the national government has processes in place to provide protections and rights to religious minorities, it has difficulty enforcing them at the local level. Reports have emerged from some areas of schools forcing girls to wear the hijab, despite government directives disallowing this practice.

In other areas, lack of accountability has allowed violent attacks or the promotion of Islamist ideology through unauthorized schools run by radical groups. In one incident, cited in the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom's 2023 report, authorities freed 21 men, convicted of burning an Ahmadiyya mosque, after only 16 days in prison. These and other incidents reveal a detrimental breakdown in rule of law and a systemic failure to protect the country's fragile religious diversity.

Resources and Reports

State Department 2022 Report on International Religious Freedom – Indonesia Chapter

USCIRF 2023 Annual Report – Indonesia Chapter



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