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TIME

Indonesia Faces Muslim Pressure

By JASON TEDJASUKMANA/JAKARTA

Thursday, May. 08, 2008



Hardline Muslim activists call for the disbanding of the Ahmadiyah religious sect in Jakarta on April 20

JEWEL SAMAD / AFP / GETTY IMAGES

Indonesia's government is caught between its constitutional obligation to protect religious freedom, and the demands of hardline Muslim clerics for the banning of the Ahmadiyah sect. An alliance, including the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), demanded on Tuesday that the government outlaw the Ahmadiyahs, warning that any delay would result in conflict. While falling short of calling for attacks on the group's mosques or followers — many of whom are now in hiding — the clerics threatened to enlist the help of other Muslim countries to pressure Jakarta into issuing an official decree forbidding Ahmadiyah followers from calling themselves Muslims. "They are hijacking our religion," claimed FPI leader Habib Rizieq Shihab. "This is not a case of religious freedom but insulting religion."

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The Ahmadiyah are a fringe group who adhere to a spinoff from Islam that arose in India in the late 19th century. Although they consider themselves Muslims, mainstream Sunni and Shi'ite Islam do not recognize them as such, because of a series of Ahmadiyah beliefs deemed contradictory to the basic tenets of Islam — Ahmadiyahs believe, for example, that Muhammad was not Islam's last prophet, and that the sect's founder, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad,

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was the Mahdi or Messiah. The sect is banned in Pakistan, although it has coexisted peacefully with Indonesian Muslims since being established in the country in 1925. The group is estimated to have around 200,000 adherents in Indonesia today.

Tuesday's warning comes on the heels of increasing tension between Ahmadiyah followers and Muslims in Lombok and West Java in recent years. In April, a joint ministerial team issued a recommendation that the government ban the group, which subsequently encouraged hardliners to step up pressure on the group and the government to issue a formal ban. Unidentified groups razed an Ahmadiyah mosque two weeks ago in West Java, threatening further violence if the group continued to defy the April 16 ministerial recommendation that the group be outlawed. Similar attacks, with few casualties thus far, have taken place in Sumatra and other parts of West Java, home to tens of thousands of followers. Since the attacks, members of the sect have stayed away from their schools and mosques for fear of further violence.

Habib Rizieq said there was no basis for fears of violence, and promised that his group, along with the Indonesian Council of Ulemas, would help "re-educate" followers of the group. "If the government issues the ban we will tell our followers to protect them," he told reporters at a press conference. Rizieq said recent clips of an FPI member on the Internet calling for the death of Ahmadiyah followers were taken out of context, as the video was filmed at a closed gathering of FPI members and did not represent the views of his organization, a puritanical group best known for its raids on bars and nightclubs.

The gathering campaign against the Ahmadiyah, however, has prompted fears of similar intimidation among other minority groups. "When one group threatens to kill another, that should be grounds enough to take action, but that hasn't happened," said Franz Magnis-Suseno, a Jesuit priest. "If these attacks have been allowed then there could be more if the group is banned outright."

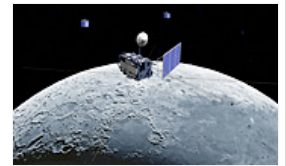
Indonesian officials had been expected to issue an official ban this week, but delayed the announcement pending further study. Civil liberties groups argue that the Ahmadiyah are protected under Indonesia's Constitution, which guarantees the right to religious freedom. "The case should be taken to the Constitutional Court because any ban would violate their right to practice their religious beliefs," proposed Hendardi, a lawyer and head of the Setara Institute for Democracy and Peace. "It also reflects decreasing religious tolerance in society worsened by the government's interference in people's private lives."

When contemplating outlawing the Ahmadiyah, the government may also be reminded of the consequences of the ban on the Indonesian Communist Party in the 1960s — a decree that was accompanied by the slaughter of an estimated 500,000 communists and suspected communists. While violence against Ahmadiyah followers has reached nowhere near those levels, some fear that government legislative action could provoke a wider torrent of violence against the sect. "It was a joint ministerial recommendation that triggered this latest violence,"

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notes Hendardi. "Imagine what would happen if it became an official decree."

Threats from radical groups have also led to the closure of at least 23 "unlicensed" churches in recent months, according to press reports, a worrying sign for a nation long heralded as one of the Islamic world's most tolerant. "Hardliners are manipulating Muslim sentiment to further their own agendas," says Azyumardi Azra from the Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University. "I don't believe it is part of a conspiracy as some have alleged, but more a factor of certain groups pushing the boundaries of democracy and the freedoms it brings."

With Indonesia due to vote in new elections in 2009, most political parties are reluctant to take any steps that would hinder their efforts to court the all-important Islamic vote. And the government hopes to avoid another hot-button issue in a time of rising food and fuel prices. Those factors weigh against the political establishment standing up to pressure from religious bodies to act against the Ahmadiyah, even if Indonesia's tradition of religious pluralism is at stake.

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