

What is Behind the Attacks against the Churches in Indonesia?

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On September 25 a bomb exploded shortly after the end of the Sunday service at the door of the Protestant Bethel church in Surakarta on the island of Java, killing the suicide bomber and wounding about 30 people. The police quickly found out that the bomber was connected to a terrorist group calling itself Tauhid al Jihad that only a few weeks before had attacked a police mosque in Cirebon. Some days later they found two low-yield bombs close to another church. Church bombings are, in fact, untypical for Indonesia. But attacks on churches occur regularly.

For the first nine month of 2011 the Jakarta Forum for Christian Communications counted 31 episodes of interference with Christian churches. In 2010 they counted 47 incidents. This raises some serious questions: why this ongoing violence against Christian churches? Is there an organization behind it? What are the prospects for the future?

Attacks on churches were rare during the first 45 years of the Republic of Indonesia. They only began to increase significantly after Suharto's "Islamic turn" around 1990, culminating in five pogroms, when over 70 churches were simultaneously and systematically attacked and mostly burned down. In 1999, against an extremely complex background, war broke out in the Moluccas and in Central Sulawesi between Christians and Muslims, resulting in more than 8000 deaths. While the Moluccan War ended in 2002, international terrorist groups got involved in Sulawesi and peace was only restored in 2007. Then, last September 11 fighting again broke out between Christians and Muslims in the Moluccan capital Ambon, resulting in two deaths and scores of burnt-down houses, while the nation held its breath. But quick intervention by police and the military restored peace after two days' rioting. The incident, provoked by some misguided rumors, shows how precarious the situation still is. On the whole, more than one thousand churches have been attacked since 1990 -- not counting about 200 destroyed during the civil wars.

The question arises of what is going on in Indonesia, the State with the biggest number of Muslims – and home to 20 million Christians, 9% of the population.

The growing difficulties for Christians in Indonesia are, on the one hand, the consequence of complex developments in Indonesia; on the other hand, the global strengthening of fundamentalist, intolerant and terrorist-prone tendencies within Islam, going back to the Iranian revolution, is also felt in Indonesia.

One factor has already been mentioned: Suharto's turn to Islam. Some Muslims held Christians responsible for their being shut out during the first 20 years of Suharto's New Order. Under the banner of proportional representation, many Christians were removed from positions in the ruling Golkar Party, the military and the administration. Besides, in Indonesia there always existed a radical Islamist wing, brutally suppressed under the first two authoritarian presidents Sukarno and Suharto. The democratic opening after the fall of

Suharto in May 1998 made it possible for them to come out into the open. Anti-Christian feelings could now express themselves. The climax of this development were the bombings on Christmas Eve 2000, at the height of the Christian–Muslim civil wars in Eastern Indonesia, when 30 bombs exploded at the same time in or around churches in Batam, Sumatra, Java, Lombok, killing 17 people and wounding over 100.

This extremely efficiently organized mega-terror plot has never been seriously investigated by the police, probably because of the supposed involvement of the military, the only organization capable of launching such a logistic masterpiece.

Intolerance at the grass-root level is indeed increasing. This means that building new churches has become increasingly difficult (government regulation stipulating that minorities need at least 60 signatures of members of the surrounding religious majority to obtain a building permit for a house of worship). At the same time threats and forced closings are experienced by “churches” which do not have an official permit.

But there are positive developments too. The most important is that during the last 15 years relations between Christians and mainstream Muslims have continuously improved. While 30 or 40 years ago Christians tended to look at the nationalistic military for protection, they now have built up trusting relations with mainstream Muslim leaders, especially those of Nadlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, the two big Islamic organizations in Indonesia. This has happened not only at the top level – our bishops in Muslim-majority regions generally have now close personal relations with their Muslim counterparts – but also at the level of parishes. Seminarians do live-ins at pesantrens (traditional Islamic boarding schools). Besides, in some places, on Christmas and Easter nights militias of Nadlatul Ulama now protect our churches.

Acts of violence cannot obscure the fact that 95% of our Christian communities live and worship free of fear and interference in the midst of a Muslim majority. Thus there is freedom of worship; there is even freedom of changing one's religion. A fight for the soul of Indonesian Islam is currently going on. Will young Muslims fall more and more under Wahabist and Salafist influences, or will Nadlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah with their moderate attitude, combining Islam, Indonesian nationalism and traditional tolerance win out in the end?

The real problem in Indonesia lies in the weakness of the State. While highly successful in fighting terrorism, the state seems reluctant to take action when minorities are threatened. Exhortations against the use of violence are not backed up with actions. A most extreme case of such inaction happened last February when a Muslim mob of more than one thousand people attacked a small Ahmadiyah community in Cikeusik in Western Java, thrashing to death three of them with the police looking on. Twelve of the attackers were later sentenced to three- to seven-month prison, not because of murder, but for carrying weapons.

Another case is the Presbyterian Yasmin church community in the city of Bogor. Since July 2010 they have held their Sunday service on the sidewalk in front of their church, protected by police and often hassled by Muslim gangs, because their church was closed down on orders of

the city mayor and, although the Indonesian High Court later declared the closure illegal, the church is still closed. Cowardice, opportunism and narrow-mindedness are behind the reluctance of the executive, legislative and judiciary branches of the State to take any action that might be unpopular with parts of the Muslim majority.

What will the future bring? Present difficulties are probably going to stay with us. Indonesia will become more Islamic. Thus life will become more difficult for Christians. But this should not obscure the fact that Christians are now much more accepted by mainstream Islam than ever was the case in Indonesia. If Indonesia's democracy stabilizes – its greatest threat is corruption of the political class – the religious freedom rooted in Indonesian culture and respected by mainstream Islam will essentially stay with us. The solid improvement in relations between Christians and Muslims during the last 15 years is probably the strongest capital for Indonesia's future.