

Freedom of Religion

Time for humankind to create a new reality

By Salil Shetty, Amnesty International, Secretary General

The Jakarta Post, 24 March 2017

Donald Trump had barely spent a month in the White House when his administration began translating his divisive campaign rhetoric into policy. Targeting people for their faith, his administration issued executive orders banning the entry of citizens from half a dozen Muslim majority countries. At a stroke of a pen, by curbing travel from countries which suffer war and strife and shutting down the US refugee resettlement program, the USA imperiled its storied tradition of welcoming refugees from across the world.

Mercifully, there are those who refuse to capitulate to fear-mongering politicians. Both of Trump's executive orders were suspended by courts, against the backdrop of large demonstrations across the USA. In the Netherlands, more recently, Geert Wilders, another supporter of banning Muslims, was denied a victory at the general elections, though worryingly the ruling party chose to adopt some of his rhetoric.

These developments hint at what's possible when people are not afraid to stand against religious intolerance, but there are no grounds for complacency. In Hungary, Viktor Orban's brand of populism has become increasingly poisonous. After losing an anti-refugee referendum last year, his government is pressing ahead with plans to force mostly Muslim migrants and refugees into container camps, secluded by razor wire, to create ghettos with worrisome echoes in European history.

In Germany, migrants and refugees were subject to more than ten attacks a day on average last year, according to the Interior Ministry. Amid this ugly mood, the German government has come under pressure to ban the full face-veil in public spaces, as other European countries have already done. There are only a few hundred women in each of these countries who wear the niqab or burqa, but by picking on a tiny minority of women, they risk casting difference as a source of danger.

The mostly male ministers who proposed these bans claim they are freeing women from oppression and yet take an approach that is just as authoritarian as banning women from leaving their homes without a niqab or burqa. It is always wrong to tell women how to dress, whether that means forcing them to wear the veil or forcing them to take it off. Governments must ensure that women are not forced to dress according to religious norms by their families or communities, but women who choose to voluntarily wear the veil are not oppressed or in need of liberation, let alone a threat to the public.

Forces of intolerance promote similar agendas in different parts of Asia. We see it in Pakistan, where Ahmadi people face horrendous state-sponsored persecution, Shi'as face a barrage of armed attacks, Hindus suffer extreme marginalization, and Christians face vigilante violence often justified by reference to the country's blasphemy laws.

In Myanmar, hardline Buddhist nationalists have grown in power and influence. And over recent months the state security forces have subjected its Rohingya minority to what may amount to crimes against humanity. While leader Aung San Suu Kyi does not control the country military, she has failed to condemn the violence, or speak out against intolerance. It is a tragic reminder that no religious community is immune to its own violent forces, and no leader, however distinguished, is immune to their own failures.

Indonesia has rich traditions of religious tolerance, and can draw lessons from places where they are under attack. It is home to the largest number of Muslims in the world, but also a country that officially recognizes six religions. Indonesia has a lively civil society that includes LGBTI rights groups and large pluralistic Muslim organizations. But there is also a troubling history of communal violence in parts of the country and recent developments that cannot be ignored and are tainting the country's tolerant image.

In Aceh, Muslims, Christians and Buddhists have been cruelly caned under Sharia punishments that have come progressively broader in scope. Three people were sentenced to prison terms of between three and five years for having been members of Gafatar, a now disbanded peaceful religious sect. They were convicted of "blasphemy" and "rebellion", vague and discriminatory laws that criminalize the peaceful expression of their rights. Ahmadis continue to be subject to intimidation and discrimination, as is also seen in other countries in Asia, and yet preachers of hate who incite people to violence are tolerated.

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Under President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo, the level of communal violence has fallen and the government has made robust statements promoting religious tolerance. That needs to be translated into more action. Lukman Hakim Saifuddin, the Minister of Religious Affairs, told me when I met him last week that the government is intent on carrying out further reforms to strengthen Indonesia's pluralist traditions.

Should it choose to draw on its diversity for strength, Indonesia can become a place where people of all faiths and none are able to live peacefully together at home, and an example to other countries - demonstrating that it is possible to have a world without mutually reinforcing enmities.

As the famous Indonesian writer Pramoedya Ananta Toer once wrote, "humankind is able to create new conditions, a new reality. We are not fated to swim forever among the realities that are here now."

Don't Confuse Religious Values With Political Interests: Jokowi

The Jakarta Globe, 25-03-2017

President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo has called on Indonesians not to confuse politics with religion to avoid a repeat of the tensions and conflict that occurred during the recent simultaneous regional elections.

This situation was most evident in the capital, where mass religious groups have been campaigning in the gubernatorial election to further their political aims.

"Do not confuse politics and religion. It should be well separated so that people know which is a religious matter and which is a political matter," Jokowi said during the inauguration of Tugu Titik Nol Pusat Peradaban Islam Nusantara, or the Zero-Point Memorial of Islamic Civilization, in Barus, North Sumatra, on Friday (24/03).

The president added that conflict between ethnic and religious groups should not occur just because of regional elections. "There should be no friction [among different people]. Don't insult others with racial and religious abuse," he said.

Jokowi said Indonesia, as the world's largest archipelago stretching from Sabang in Aceh to Merauke in Papua, is home to numerous ethnic, religious and cultural groups.

He praised the value of the nation's official motto, *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, or Unity in Diversity, and said it should be properly maintained for an incomparable blessing from God, as embedded in Indonesia's state philosophy of Pancasila.

"We have 34 provinces and 516 districts [or cities]. We are very diverse. Don't allow any conflicts to occur based on racial and religious grounds," he said.

The president's call for harmony is affirmed by the people of Central Tapanuli in North Sumatra, as the region is known for being peaceful despite vast religious differences within the local community.

"We are grateful that the people of Central Tapanuli are not easily provoked by issues that compromise the harmony between religious groups," said Bukit Tambunan, a Central Tapanuli public servant.

Jokowi was also scheduled to officiate at a groundbreaking ceremony for an Islamic boarding school in North Sumatra's Mandailing Natal district.

Prison conditions

More Cipinang inmates transferred to Nusakambangan

The Jakarta Post, 26-03-2017

As an effort to resolve overcrowding issues in penitentiaries across Indonesia, 100 convicts from the Cipinang penitentiary were moved to Nusakambangan prison island in Cilacap, Central Java, on Saturday.

Abdul Aris, the Nusakambangan prison warden, said that most of the convicts from Cipinang that were transferred were in prison for drug-related crimes.

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"Cipinang is overcrowded. The penitentiary is supposed to house only 1,000 convicts, but right now it is accommodating 3,000 convicts," Abdul said on Saturday, as quoted by tribunnews.com.

Nusakambangan, which is also known as the place where the government carries out executions of death row inmates, is among the few options that the government has to relocate the convicts.

(Read also: A look at Nusakambangan, Indonesia's 'execution island')

Right now Nusakambangan is accommodating 1,300 convicts while it can house a total of 3,000 inmates. Aris said Nusakambangan will also receive 350 more convicts from other penitentiaries. Besides Nusakambangan, Purwokerto and Pekalongan penitentiaries are also receiving inmates from the overcrowded penitentiary.

Political developments

Djarot Slams Sandiaga for Ignoring Police Summons in Embezzlement Case

The Jakarta Globe, 27-03-2017

Incumbent Jakarta Deputy Governor Djarot Saiful Hidayat said his rival, Sandiaga Uno, should respect the ongoing legal process involving an investigation into embezzlement, in which the latter is implicated.

Sandiaga, who will contest the second round¹ of the gubernatorial election as Anies Baswedan's running mate, failed to comply with a police summons to attend questioning on March 21. Djarot also questioned the severity of the case that prompted Sandiaga to plea for leniency.

The incumbent said he showed up both times the police summoned him as a witness in a case involving people preventing him from campaigning in parts of Jakarta.

¹ The second round of the Jakarta gubernatorial elections is planned on 19 April 2017 [MM]

"I can only say that we are part of a nation of law. Complying with the law means we must face [any issues]. I was summoned twice by the police after people prevented me from campaigning, and I attended the questioning [on both occasions]," Djarot said on Monday (27/03).

Djarot said all legal processes should be resolved, regardless of the severity of the issues involved.

Police summoned Sandiaga to clarify his role in the alleged misappropriation of funds in a Rp 7 billion (\$527,000) land transaction in 2012.

He has so far denied any wrongdoing and according to a statement by his lawyer, the matter was merely a misunderstanding between two friends due to political differences.

The businessman-turned-politician has tried to justify his decision not to comply with the summons by claiming that it was merely a request by police to assist in an investigation and not a formal notice to appear.

Terrorism and Counter-terrorism

Suspected Indonesian Radical Killed in Counter-Terrorism Operation

The Jakarta Globe, 24-03-2017 (Reuters)

Indonesian police killed a suspected radical and detained three on Thursday (23/03) during a counter-terrorism operation in an industrial area just hours away from the capital Jakarta.

Indonesia has the world's largest Muslim population and has been on high alert over a recent resurgence in radicalism inspired by the extremist group Islamic State. Officials said one suspect died on the way to hospital after being shot. "The suspect was not being cooperative and tried to ram his car into a police vehicle so he was immobilized by an officer," national police spokesman Rikwanto said in a statement, adding that a firearm was seized from the scene.

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He added the man was suspected of being part of Jemaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD), an umbrella organisation on a US State Department "terrorist" list that is estimated to have drawn hundreds of Islamic State sympathizers in Indonesia.

Four people were killed in Jakarta last year when militants launched a gun and bomb attack in the heart of the city. It was the first attack in the region claimed by Islamic State.

Indonesia has stepped up its counter-terrorism operations, rounding up dozens of suspected radicals across the country, and called on other countries to boost cooperation and intelligence-sharing.

President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo condemned Wednesday's attack near the British parliament in which four people, including the attacker, were killed, and dozens wounded. "Indonesia again calls for massive cooperation between countries to eradicate terrorism," Jokowi said in a statement.