

Indonesia is, by population, the world's largest Muslim-majority nation and yet it is not constitutionally an Islamic state. According to a 2010 census, approximately 87.2% of the population is Muslim (the majority Sunni), 7% is Protestant, just under 3% is Catholic, and 1.7% is Hindu.

Indonesia's 1945 constitution (as amended) enshrines protection for religious pluralism under the state ideology known as 'Pancasila', based on a belief in God, as the first of its five principles, and a guarantee for the right to practice the religion of one's choice. Indonesia has also signed and ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), Article 18 of which contains provisions for freedom of religion or belief (FoRB). The country has made a remarkable transition from authoritarianism to democracy over the past two decades, but the path has not been a smooth one and significant barriers to human rights, particularly in regard to FoRB remain.

Legal framework

While the principle of religious pluralism is at the heart of Indonesia's constitution, and there is no state religion, it is limited by the official recognition of only six religions: Buddhism, Catholicism, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam and Protestantism. Religious beliefs and practices outside the six officially recognised faiths are not protected, nor is the right to atheism, putting religious minorities and local belief systems that fall outside of this framework at risk of systemic exclusion and legal uncertainty.

Religion-related policy and religious life in Indonesia is regulated through the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI), a semi-official clerical body whose fatwas are not legally binding but hold significant social and political weight. Religion or belief groups that are not officially recognised must obtain approval by registering as civil society organisations with the Ministry of Home Affairs. Operating without the ministry's authorisation can lead to criminal charges. This has particularly affected indigenous spiritual traditions (aliran kepercayaan) and other faiths, such as the Baha'i and Jewish communities, as well as newer religious movements.

Several joint ministerial decrees have contributed to ongoing FoRB violations, including the 1996 decree by Indonesia's Provisional People's Consultative Assembly (MPRS), and with the 2003 National Education System Act on mandatory religious education at all levels of schooling.

Limitations on places of worship

The 2006 Joint Regulation of the Minister of Religious Affairs and the Minister of Home Affairs on the construction of places of worship prohibits religious groups from holding services in private residences, and requires registered religious groups to build new houses of worship through the collecting of at

least 90 signatures from adherents and a minimum of 60 signatures from members of the surrounding community alongside recommendations from a local interfaith council, called the Religious Harmony Forum (FKUB), and district officials. In practice these requirements create opportunities for obstruction, intimidation and discrimination, particularly against religious minority communities seeking approval to build or renovate places of worship, and particularly in areas predominantly inhabited by those of another faith. This often leads to prolonged delays or denials of construction permits. In West Java and Sumatra, several churches have experienced sealing or demolition as a result of alleged permit issues.

Blasphemy laws

In 1965 Indonesia's then-President Sukarno issued Presidential Decree No. 1/PNPS/1965, which prohibits interpretations 'in deviation of the basic teaching' of the country's six officially recognised religions – Buddhism, Catholicism, Confucianism, Islam, Hinduism and Protestantism – and grants the president the authority to dissolve any organisation practicing such teachings.

The decree is complemented by Article 156(a) of the Indonesian Penal Code, which stipulates that any person who publicly 'gives expression to feelings or commits an act which principally have the character of being at enmity with, abusing or staining a religion' shall be sentenced to up to five years in prison.

These laws have been used disproportionately to prosecute those from religious minorities and those who are said to have criticised or insulted Islam, and Human Rights Watch reports that over 150 people have faced prosecution under them since their introduction in 1965.¹

In recent years, digital content perceived as offensive or harmful to recognised religion has increasingly been addressed through the Electronic Information and Transactions (EIT) law, which regulates internet content and has been used in conjunction with other laws, such as the blasphemy laws. In March 2025 social media influencer Ratu Thalisa, a Muslim trans woman, was sentenced to two years and 10 months in prison and fined 100 million rupiah (approximately GBP 4,100) under hate speech and blasphemy provisions of the EIT law. The conviction related to a response she posted to a comment using an image of Jesus Christ during a TikTok livestream.²

A controversial new criminal code passed by parliament in December 2022 officially came into force on 2 January 2026, as Law No.1 of 2023. The enacted code includes provisions that further restrict FoRB and free expression, which broadens the existing blasphemy laws from a single provision into six articles (Article 300 – 305), and criminalises the defamation of religion and leaving a religion or belief

1 Human Rights Watch, 'Indonesia: Draft Criminal Code Disastrous for Rights', 18 September 2019 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/09/18/indonesia-draft-criminal-code-disastrous-rights>

2 Amnesty International, 'Indonesia: Trans woman's prison sentence for 'insulting' Jesus must be quashed', 10 Mar 2025 <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/03/indonesia-trans-womans-prison-sentence-for-insulting-jesus-must-be-quashed/>

as apostasy, with sentences of up to five years in prison. Furthermore, Article 2 allows for the enforcement of 'living laws', a vaguely defined category, which, in practice, grants formal recognition to the provincial implementation and regulation of Islamic by-laws, or 'shari'a law'. Human rights organisations warn that this development risks legitimising the discriminatory regional by-laws, and compounds the existing oppression of non-Muslim religious minorities and further enables the political weaponisation of religion.

Implementation of local Islamic by-laws and regulations

In various provinces and districts, including Aceh, local Islamic by-laws are enforced by Islamic courts, which conflict with national commitments to FoRB and equality. These include forced compliance of dress codes such as mandatory hijab requirements in schools, moral policing, and penalties under Islamic criminal law. These by-laws have a disproportionate effect on women, members of the LGBTQ+ community and religious minorities. The family law, which is influenced by Islamic legal norms, often fails to protect the rights of women who do not practice the majority faith, further limiting their autonomy in personal and family matters. The establishment of these laws and practices under the notion of 'living laws' in the new criminal code may reinforce legal discrimination against vulnerable groups in the country.

Implementation of shari'a law in Aceh

Aceh remains the only province in Indonesia with special autonomy granted since 2001 to enforce shari'a law. Shari'a law is also enforced by Islamic courts, and since 2015 Aceh has applied the Islamic criminal code, including the criminalisation of consensual same-sex conduct. Citizens' arrests are common in Aceh, with locals empowered to detain individuals and hand them over to the shari'a police, which often results in corporal punishment such as flogging, despite this violating Indonesia's obligation under international human rights law to protect individuals from all forms of cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment.

Religious violence and harassment by non-state actors

Extremist Islamist groups such as the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) and various vigilante organisations continue to carry out attacks on Ahmadiyya communities, Christian churches and Shi'a mosques. Despite the FPI's official disbandment in 2020, in practice, its networks and ideology are still in effect. In most cases, law enforcement fails to adequately protect victims and religious minority groups from societal

hostilities, which further grants the perpetrators a sense of impunity.

Christian communities often experience societal discrimination, which includes disruptions to their worship services and limitations on their gatherings. For example, in March 2024 members of the Thessalonika Church in Teluknaga, Tangerang Regency faced eviction and were prohibited from gathering for worship by a local mob after conducting services in a rented residential following the lease expiration of their previous venue.³ In December 2024 Christians in Cibinong, Bogor Regency, experienced resistance from residents who opposed the use of residential properties as places of worship while trying to organise their Christmas worship services in a residential housing complex.⁴ As a result, the Christians were coerced into relocating their service to an open space behind the housing complex.

In mid-2025 and early 2026, local vigilante mobs and regional authorities increasingly weaponised building permit requirements as a pretext to justify forcible disruptions of religious gatherings in private homes and rented venues used for worship.⁵ Indonesian human rights organisations, including the Centre for Human Rights Studies of the University of Islam in Indonesia (Pusat Studi Hak Asasi Manusia – Universitas Islam Indonesia, PUSHAM UII),⁶ emphasise that under Indonesian constitutional law and Article 18 of the ICCPR, lacking an administrative building permit does not validate the fundamental right to freedom of worship.

For instance, in July 2025 a local mob armed with wooden blocks forcibly dispersed and vandalised a prayer house run by the Indonesian Faithful Christian Church (GKSI) in Koto Tangah, Padang. The attack resulted in property destruction during a religious instruction session, causing children to flee in panic and resulted in two children being injured. The incident followed a similar pattern of the disruption of religious gatherings by local vigilantes targeting youth retreats by claiming a lack of temporary assembly permits in Cidahu, West Java in June 2025.⁷

Ahmadiyya Muslims

The Ahmadiyya community has existed in Indonesia since 1925 and has a population of approximately 500,000 across 330 branches throughout the country. Despite identifying as Muslim, they are perceived as heretics by the majority Sunni Muslim population.

3 LicAS News, 'Indonesian authorities react to church disruption video, offer temporary worship site', 30 July 2024 <https://www.licas.news/2024/07/30/indonesian-authorities-react-to-church-disruption-video-offer-temporary-worship-site/>

4 detikNews, 'Viral Christmas Service in Bogor Housing Rejected by Residents, Here is the Police Explanation', 11 December 2024 (Indonesian) <https://news.detik.com/berita/d-7681384/viral-ibadah-natal-di-perumahan-bogor-ditolak-warga-ini-penjelasan-polisi>

5 Antara News, 'SETARA Institute: There were 221 violations of religious freedom in 2025', 11 March 2026 (Indonesian) <https://www.antaranews.com/berita/5467235/setara-institute-ada-221-pelanggaran-kebebasan-beragama-pada-2025>

6 PUSHAM UII, Local Government Responsible for Violence Against GKSI Congregation Members in Padang City, Jul 2025 (Indonesian) <https://pusham.uui.ac.id/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/Rilis-Media-Intoleransi-Padang-28-Juli-2025.pdf>

7 SETARA Institute, Reorientation of State Policy and Action, 10 March 2025 (Indonesian) <https://setara-institute.org/wp-content/uploads/Rilis-Data-KBB-2025-1.pdf>

Since 2005 the Ahmadiyya community has experienced serious violations of FoRB, including incidents of violence against followers and their properties with impunity. In 2008 a Joint Decree of the Minister of Religious Affairs, the Attorney General and the Minister of Home Affairs prohibited members of the community from disseminating their teachings, resulting in official restrictions and social hostility.

Some government officials have responded to violence with anti-Ahmadiyya rhetoric. For instance, in 2011, the then-Minister of Religious Affairs repeatedly called for an outright ban on the Ahmadiyya, and in 2013 the governor of West Java said that there would be no violence against the Ahmadiyya if there were no Ahmadiyya teachings or practices, describing Ahmadiyya Islam as ‘a deviant belief.’⁸ The ‘problem,’ he added, ‘will disappear if the belief disappears.’

Some Ahmadi representatives noted a slight improvement in engagement under President Joko Widodo who was in office from 2014 to 2024. However, the intimidation of the Ahmadiyya community continues and their activities continue to be restricted. For example, on 14 January 2022 UCANews reported that a district chief in Indonesia’s Sintang, West Kalimantan province had ordered the demolition of an Ahmadi Mosque that had been damaged in a September 2021 attack by Muslim extremists.⁹ The perpetrators of the attack were sentenced to just four months in prison.

According to documentation by the SETARA Institute for Democracy and Peace, restrictions and discrimination against the Ahmadiyya community increased from eight cases in 2024 to 12 cases in 2025. Incidents include both state and non-state disruption or closure of annual gatherings in various regions, as well as forced cancellation of academic and public book-review events regarding Ahmadiyya teachings.¹⁰

Christians

Indonesia is home to 34.2 million Christians, comprising both Catholic and Protestant communities, accounting for around 10-12% of the total population. Christians face various obstacles to practising their faith freely, including through intimidation, violence, and the denial of permits for building churches from local communities and authorities.

2025 monitoring by the SETARA Institute highlights that most violations targeting Christians and Catholics throughout 2025 involved disputes over building and using houses of worship. Places of worship remained the central point of conflict at the local level, where buildings that serve as both community hubs and religious symbols are viewed with hostility and treated as threats leading to widespread public

rejection, social pressure, and the forced closure of religious gatherings in specific regions.

Case studies across the country demonstrate the adverse structural impacts of the Joint Decree of the Minister of Religious Affairs and the Minister of Home Affairs. For example, in Cilegon, Banten Province, which has a Christian population of around 7,000, including over 1,000 Catholics, there are no churches and Christians have to drive 45 minutes to reach the nearest church. In 2022 plans to build a church on land belonging to Batak Protestant Christian Church in the city were halted by regional officials despite the fact that the church had gathered far more than the minimum required signatures from those within their faith and from the local community to proceed.

Indonesian Christians have also suffered deadly violence at the hands of Islamic extremists in recent years. On 30 November 2020 IS-linked Islamic militants carried out an attack on a Salvation Army outpost in Lemban Tongoa village in Central Sulawesi Province. Four people were killed, one of whom was beheaded, and several buildings were burnt down, including a house used for prayers.

Similar to the experience of other religious minorities, Christians also frequently face accusations and are charged under Indonesia’s blasphemy laws. The most significant case was the conviction of former governor of Jakarta, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (known as ‘Ahok’), a Chinese Christian, who was sentenced to two years imprisonment for allegedly insulting Islam in 2017. As a Chinese Christian, Ahok was Indonesia’s most prominent ethnic minority politician and the first non-Muslim governor of Jakarta for over 50 years. He was released from prison three months early on 24 January 2019. His prosecution highlighted both religious and racial intolerance.

In April 2022 a Christian YouTuber, Muhammed Kece, was sentenced to 10 years in prison for posting a video that allegedly insulted the Prophet Mohammad. It was reported that whilst in jail following his arrest, Kece was beaten and tortured by fellow inmates.

Members of unrecognised religions

While a 2017 Constitutional Court ruling allowed followers of minority religious groups, including those of indigenous faiths, that are not part of the officially recognised six to list their belief as non-specified ‘believers’ on their national identity cards (ID), practical implementation remains limited for many. Communities such as the Baha’is continue to experience difficulties accessing civil services, including marriage registration and burial rights. Despite this progress, individuals identifying as atheists are left with no option to register their belief on ID cards.

⁸ UCANews, ‘Governor’s comment on Ahmadiya sect sparks outrage’, 8 May 2013 <https://www.ucanews.com/news/governors-comment-on-ahmadiya-sect-sparks-outrage/68208>

⁹ UCANews, ‘Indonesian district to demolish Ahmadi house of worship’, 14 January 2022 <https://www.ucanews.com/news/indonesian-district-to-demolish-ahmadi-house-of-worship/95731>

¹⁰ Op. cit. fn 7

Under current cabinet restructuring, the Directorate of Belief in One Almighty God and Indigenous People was moved under the Ministry of Culture.¹¹ While the state recognises indigenous faiths strictly as ‘culture’ or ‘customary heritage’ and established 13 July as a ‘National Day of Believers’ in 2026,¹² research from the Indonesian Consortium for Religious Studies (ICRS) highlights that this cultural framing creates a bureaucratic mismatch.¹³ Such categorisation isolates indigenous communities under cultural preservation rather than religious affairs and excludes them from mainstream religious rights framework and safeguards managed by the Ministry of Religious Affairs.

Recommendations

To the government of Indonesia:

- Ensure that crimes against religious minorities cannot be committed with impunity, that impartial and timely investigations are properly carried out and perpetrators prosecuted.
- Repeal or amend the blasphemy provisions (Articles 300-305 of Law No. 1/2023) and issue clear judicial directives limiting the application of ‘living laws’ to prevent local vigilante enforcement and to ensure that they are not misused to settle personal scores or target religious minorities.
- Review the 2008 anti-Ahmadiyya decree and work towards its repeal.
- Invest in initiatives to protect and promote the principles of freedom of religion or belief and to promote interfaith harmony and dialogue beyond rhetorical ‘moderation’ programs.
- Invite the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief to visit the country with unhindered access, and issue a standing invitation to Special Procedures.

To the government of the United Kingdom:

- Prioritise FoRB in UK-Indonesia Strategic Dialogue in all bilateral talks including trade, to ensure human rights clauses are tied to economic cooperation.
- Use the UK’s influence at the UN to urge Indonesia to repeal or revise blasphemy laws and the anti-Ahmadiyya decree.

- Provide targeted funding and capacity-building through UK human rights funds to local organisations supporting persecuted religious minorities and promoting interfaith tolerance.
- Urge the government of Indonesia, at every appropriate opportunity, to make the reforms highlighted in the recommendation section above ‘To the government of Indonesia’.

To the United Nations and Member States:

- Urge all relevant UN mechanisms, including the Special Procedures and Treaty Bodies, to include the right to FoRB in their reporting on Indonesia, addressing the vulnerabilities and violations faced by minority religion or belief communities and those seeking to defend them.
- Utilise the Universal Periodic Review process, Human Rights Council sessions and other key international human rights instruments to raise FoRB concerns in Indonesia and to offer recommendations to advance FoRB.
- Encourage Indonesia to issue a standing invitation to UN Special Procedures.
- Urge the government of Indonesia, at every appropriate opportunity, to make the reforms highlighted in the recommendation section above ‘To the government of Indonesia’.

11 FISIP, ‘Separation of Ministries: A Strategy for Advancing Indonesian Culture’ 25 October 2024 <https://fisip.unair.ac.id/en/fisip-statement-separation-of-ministries-a-strategy-for-advancing-indonesian-culture/>

12 Literasi Hukum Indonesia, ‘Government Designates July 13 as Trust Day, Not a National Holiday’, 11 July 2026 <https://literasihukum.com/en/news/government-designates-july-13-as-trust-day-not-a-national-holiday>

13 Indonesian Consortium for Religious Studies, Understanding and Mitigating Polarization in Indonesia, 2026 <https://www.icrs.or.id/publication/understanding-and-mitigating-polarization-in-indonesia>

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