

SELECT JOURNALISM CLIPS ON LGBTQ AND ISSUES ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM BY ADI RENALDI

Indonesia's LGBTQ community angry at rise of conversion therapies

JAKARTA -- Kai Mata found herself at the center of a homophobic storm last year when she posted a video of herself online denouncing a draft of bill that included articles on forcing LGBTQ people to undergo conversion therapy to "cure" their sexual orientation or gender identity.

"I am Indonesian and LGBTQ+," the caption of the video posted on Twitter read. "Help stop a bill that would require conversion therapy here in the fourth-most populated country in the world."

Mata, a 22-year-old Bali-based lesbian singer-songwriter and one of the country's most outspoken LGBTQ activists, told Nikkei Asia she received a around 400 hate messages and death threats within a day of posting the clip.

Undeterred, she continued writing very personal folk songs about her identity and issues surrounding the LGBTQ community.

But last month, she received a direct message on Instagram promoting ruqyah, or Islamic conversion therapy. The advertisement was for a website called terapikonversi.co that offers corrective rape, electroconvulsive therapy, and exorcism, telling her: "It's not too late to turn to God. Allah has not left you... Let us help you cast out the demon within you."

She angrily posted the advertisement on her Instagram account, and it turned out that at least a dozen of her fellow activists received the same message. She wrote a song about conversion therapy, hoping to share the view that LGBTQ identities don't need to be fixed.

"[I felt] violated due to being directly targeted with this jarring 'treatment' program," she told Nikkei. "[It frustrated me] from the realization that many in Indonesia think we need 'curing,' as if we are a diseased, flawed part of our diverse population."

The administrator at terapikonversi.co was not immediately available to comment for this story. The website only has an email address, contact form, and an inactive Facebook account.

Although ruqyah has been used since the early days of Islam to cast out evil spirits, it is unclear as to when the practice began to target the LGBTQ community. The practice includes techniques such reciting verses from the Quran, immersing people in cold water,

and more extreme methods including rape.

Dedi Natadiningrat, a cleric and practitioner of ruqyah at Cirebon Al Quran Therapy in West Java, said he had received "seven LGBTQ patients wishing to be cured" since he started his business in 2010.

"By the grace of Allah, I can say that one person I treated now has changed his orientation by 60%," Natadiningrat told Nikkei, without further elaborating what the percentage means. "But some others showed no change. Of course they can only be cured if God is willing."

Natadiningrat denied he ever practiced corrective rape, saying his practice only includes Quranic recitals.

Dr. Dina Listiorini, a lecturer at the Department of Communication at Atma Jaya University in Yogyakarta, said the rise of ruqyah to combat identity and sexual orientation can be traced back to early 2000 after the downfall of the authoritarian New Order regime under former dictator Suharto. At that time, conservative Muslims enjoyed greater freedom after being repressed for more than 30 years.

"The 2000s pop culture justified this notion," said Listiorini, who conducts extensive research on discrimination against LGBTQ community. "Islamic TV shows were everywhere, and at the same time the media started to depict LGBTQ public figures as outcasts."

Despite the fact that homosexuality was ruled out as mental disorder and disease by the World Health Organization and in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders in late 1980s, many conservative religious groups still say that it is a disease that is deviant and sinful.

"The campaign of ruqyah is an attempt to normalize what they see as abnormal or deviant," Listiorini said. "In the end, this homophobic campaign ends up in violence against gender plurality."

Moreover, sections of state apparatus have promoted and sponsored the vilification of the LGBTQ community.

The city of Pariaman in West Sumatra passed a regional law to fine LGBTQ community members for "disturbing public order" in 2018; the mayor of Padang, also in West Sumatra, led a two-kilometer rally to reject the presence of the community; and since 2019, the regional government of Depok city in West Java has repeatedly attempted to pass a law to ban the community.

Arus Pelangi, a Jakarta-based LGBTQ advocacy group, recorded more than 1,800

persecution cases against community members across Indonesia between 2006-2018. These findings may not reflect the true figure as incidents often go unreported and that some people feel hesitant to report to authorities for fear of repercussion.

Arif Nuh Safri, a cleric with the all-transgender Islamic boarding school Al Fatah in Yogyakarta, said no practice of ruqyah has proved to be effective.

"I heard from fellow clerics about ruqyah for LGBTQ. I said 'please prove it. You can come to Al Fatah anytime if you can prove it.' But nobody has come yet," Safri said. "How can you change the identity of who you are?"

Safri, a lecturer at State Islamic University in Yogyakarta, said some people had told him how they endured ruqyah in the past and how it traumatized them.

"All told the same," he said. "It was torture and inhumane."

Published by Nikkei Asia

<https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Society/Indonesia-s-LGBTQ-community-angry-at-rise-of-conversion-therapies>

Indonesia Has Hundreds of Indigenous Religions. So Why are They Only Being Recognized Now?

Local faiths may have sprung from Indonesian soil, but they fell out of favor long ago. Now, a court ruling hopes to reverse this discrimination. Will it work?

Pungkas Singaraska is a believer of the old ways. He practices *Kejawen*, an ancient faith with roots in the Indonesian island of Java. The faith predates the arrival of Islam in Indonesia by more than a century, but it has now incorporated aspects of the Muslim faith into its belief structure. Today, Kejawen is an amalgamation, a faith that mixes parts of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam with older Javanese animist beliefs. It's a mystical faith, one of spirits and spells and it's deeply connected to traditional Javanese culture.

But that doesn't necessarily mean it's accepted. For his entire life, Pungkas has dealt with people who told him that his beliefs were wrong. His family and neighbors told him that he had to convert to "the right path" and stop with all these outdated mystical ideas. Islam is the predominant religion of modern day Java, and the followers of these older faiths are seen by many as backwards. By refusing to change, Pungkas has suffered a lifetime of discrimination for following a faith with roots right in his own backyard.

"I can't pray with my community because we've gotten so much pressure from the neighborhood," Pungkas told VICE. "Now I just pray alone, in secret, at my house. There's a holy site in Yogyakarta that's supposed to be our place to pray, but we don't dare go there. People from mainstream religions still think our prayers are deviant and weird. They always shake their heads when they see us."

The Constitutional Court took the biggest step toward standardizing the acceptance of indigenous faiths this week when judges ruled that the followers for about 245 native religions could write the catch-all "Believers of the Faith," in the religion field of their national identity card. Indonesia is constitutionally a pluralistic nation, but it's one where you have to be a follower of one of six state-supported religions: Islam, Catholicism, Christianity (Protestantism), Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism.

For decades, the followers of local indigenous religions like Kejawen had to either leave the religion field blank or select one of the six acceptable faiths. That's how a lot of Kejawen believers became Muslim, or why the Dayak people, followers of their own *Kaharingan* religion, suddenly saw their religion listed as Hindu on their government IDs.

"In order to survive, I have the religion column of my government ID filled in with Islam," Pungkas told VICE. "We have no choice. The situation forced us to do this, because otherwise we would be discriminated against whenever we try to access public services."

This is the dark side of Indonesia's pluralism. The Muslim-majority country continues to earn accolades worldwide as a place of tolerance and acceptance, but, for decades, that only counted if you were a follower of one of the state-sponsored faiths.

For the hundreds of thousands of followers of indigenous religions, the Big Six were a steamroller running over their own local beliefs in an effort to unify disparate parts of this wildly diverse nation under the banner of shared religion. It's why the Bayan people of Lombok are still called "primitive" and "deviant" by Sunni Muslims for practicing their own version of Islam—*Welu Telu*. A lot of people today look down on the old ways as little more than outdated faiths.

Indigenous peoples activists welcomed the Constitutional Court decision as a necessary step toward addressing a long-pressing issue. But it's going to take more than a court ruling to reverse decades of discrimination and cultural assimilation, explained Rukka Sombolinggi, the general secretary of the non-profit that advocates for the rights of indigenous people that goes by the acronym AMAN.

"The Constitutional Court's ruling is long overdue," Rukka told VICE. "At least now native faith believers have legal protection. But legal protection doesn't guarantee the discrimination will stop."

Followers of local faiths previously struggled to receive basic government documents, like marriage and birth certificates, because the state wouldn't recognize their religion. These issues later have add-on effects, making it difficult for them to access health care, education, and other government-funded social services.

Nationwide, instances of religious intolerance continue to plague Indonesia. In 2016 alone, the Setara Institute, a nonprofit which focuses on intolerance issues, recorded 208 instances of religious discrimination in 24 provinces. Almost all of them were instances where a group, usually with the tacit support of local authorities, had tried to prevent someone from practicing their own religion.

For many, the response to this kind of discrimination has been to adapt. Many indigenous peoples have now folded their local beliefs into one of the dominate religions, creating their own syncretic version Christianity or Islam. In the highlands of South Sulawesi, the Torajan people incorporated their old beliefs about death and the afterlife into Christianity with surprising success. Today, the two faiths are intertwined to create a version of Christianity where ritual buffalo sacrifice still has a home. But in other communities, the old ways aren't as easily accepted.

"The pressure to convert to one of the six recognized faiths still exists," Rukka told VICE. "I have also seen a lot of religious figures in villages try to convert indigenous peoples."

Other experts wonder why the state is so involved in religion in the first place. The constitution places the belief in one god as central to the foundations of the nation, but that doesn't necessarily mean that the central government needs to regulate religion to this degree. Samsul Maarif, of the Center for Religious and Cross-Cultural Studies (CRCS) at the University of Gadjah Mada in Yogyakarta, explained that this government overreach actually has its roots in Suharto-era efforts to control and manipulate the population.

The New Order regime were behind the official designation of "acceptable" religions. In 1978, Gen. Suharto's government announced that there were five recognized religions—Confucianism wasn't given the state's approval because the regime was obsessed with wiping out Chinese culture, to the point that it required all ethnic Chinese citizens to change their last names and banned any outward displays of Chinese culture.

Suharto's regime conducted a census of everyone's religious beliefs in order to make apparent the differences between people as part of a system of control, Samsul explained. While Sukarno had tried to unite the nation through, among other things, a shared *lingua franca*, the Suharto regime reminded everyone just how different they all were.

"The state is perpetuating a system of faith-based political recognition," Samsul said. "By doing so, religion was used to differentiate one citizen from another."

Before independence there were an estimated 396 different native faiths in Central Java alone. Today, at least 60 of these religions have gone extinct, Tedi Kholiluddin, the director of the Religion and Social Studies Institute (Elsa), told Tempo. The main cause? Government and societal pressure to convert to an accepted faith.

The situation worsened under the leadership of former President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono with the passage of the "religious harmony law"—a law that recast the nation as a country of six equal religions to one of one major faith (Islam) and five other minority religions. Under the law, minority religions were required to respect the wishes of the majority—going as far as requiring minority religion practitioners to gather the signatures of their community before opening a house of worship.

If Suharto's policies reinforced the differences between all Indonesians, SBY's administration codified the inherent imbalances in a country where 87 percent of the population identifies as Sunni Muslim. Harmony was now in the eye of the majority, a fact that made life difficult for members of religious minorities and near impossible for those who followed indigenous, but still unrecognized, faiths.

In 2014, President Joko Widodo's administration made life a little easier for indigenous peoples by allowing them to leave the religion field on their government ID blank. In the past you had to select one of the six faiths, regardless of your actual beliefs.

The court ruling opened the door to the state's acceptance of local religions, but it also potentially created a situation where it's easier to identify, and persecute, followers of indigenous faiths. Pungkas told VICE he was wary of putting "Believers of the Faith," on his government ID. The courts may have ruled in his favor, but the Ministry of Religious Affairs still only represents the six major religions.

"I think it's safer if the religion column on the ID card is left blank," Pungkas told VICE. "I'm afraid now that we can fill in the column, there will be even more pressure from society to change."

Meanwhile, while the court's decision addressed the discrimination of followers of indigenous religions, it didn't touch on faiths considered "deviant" like Ahmadiyah Muslims or the Fajar Nusantara Movement (Gafatar). Both faiths, each of them an offshoot of mainstream Islam, continue to be the subject of widespread persecution.

That's why, court decision or not, Pungkas believes that the country is still a far way from accepting religions like his own. It's going to take more than a line on a government ID to change something like that.

Published on VICE

<https://www.vice.com/en/article/3kv7py/indonesia-has-hundreds-of-indigenous-religions-so-why-are-they-only-being-recognized-now>

Indonesia's First All-Women Flogging Squad in Aceh Is Here To Stay

"We are essentially indoctrinating them to understand their roles — to show no mercy to those who violate God's law."

Public canings are business as usual in Aceh, the only Indonesian province that practices the strict Islamic law known as Sharia. In an effort to better abide by Sharia, the province formed its first all-women flogging team to carry out punishments against female offenders.

One of the most recent recipients of this form of punishment was an unmarried woman who was caught in a hotel room with a man. Donning a brown cloak, rattan cane at the ready, the executioner delivered swift blows to the shoulder of the convicted woman, who was kneeling on the stage dressed in a white niqab.

"I think she did a good job," Banda Aceh Sharia police chief investigator Zakwan, who like many Indonesians goes by one name, told AFP. "Her technique was nice."

Aceh is currently home to eight women executioners. Zakwan said it was initially difficult to convince them to do the job but after years of persistence, he was able to form the nation's first all-woman flogging team. He trained them on caning techniques and how to minimise wounds.

"We are essentially indoctrinating them to understand their roles — to show no mercy to those who violate God's law," Zakwan said.

The first caning by a female executioner in Aceh took place on December 10 last year, when a 26-year-old woman was caught with four military men in a private setting. She was sentenced to five lashes. The four men? They evaded a caning and were tried separately in a military court.

Being caught alone with a member of the opposite sex as an unmarried person — along with drinking alcohol, using drugs, and having gay or extramarital sex — will likely earn you a flogging in Aceh. Sharia police are on the lookout for offenders 24 hours a day, routinely patrolling public places and conducting busts based on tips from locals.

Sharia law in Aceh supposedly applies equally to Acehnese of all ranks, but corrupt officials have managed to avoid public floggings. In October, an Aceh religious leader involved in creating anti-adultery laws was publicly flogged for adultery, marking the first time a public figure was subjected to the punishment.

Human rights activists continue to criticise the practice of caning. Executive Director of Amnesty International Indonesia, Usman Hamid, declared the practice inhumane and degrading. "This form of punishment is cruel, inhumane, degrading, and tortuous. These canings are held as public spectacles meant to humiliate. Nobody deserves such cruel treatment as this," Hamid told DW.

Published on VICE

<https://www.vice.com/en/article/3a8kak/indonesia-first-all-women-flogging-squad-aceh-sharia>

Inside Indonesia's Sharia Village Havens

The Islamic housing industry — which allows people to live under sharia law — is rapidly developing and raising concerns of social tension.

For proponents of Islam's strict sharia law, a society without smoking, music, and indecent clothing is a dream come true. In Indonesia, where a halal lifestyle (from [halal cosmetics](#) to [halal tourism](#)) is already available, that dream is a reality for thousands of families.

Herman Jaelani is the head of a Muslim-only, sharia-based neighbourhood known as Thoyibah, who moved there because it aligned with his beliefs.

"We live peacefully and openly with other residents," Jaelani said. "But sometimes outsiders have no manners and just come as they please."

The neighbourhood of Thoyibah is located away from the hustle and bustle of Jakarta, just across the Cikarang Bekasi river, roughly a two-hour drive from the capital. Surrounding the neighbourhood are warehouses and rice paddies. The only way to reach the small village is via a narrow dirt road.

There are 400 homes in the housing complex, but only 120 are occupied. The village is also home to an Islamic boarding school, a children's Quran learning centre, a prayer hall, and a half-finished mosque. A sign on a pole that reads "Muslim Attire Only" greets everyone who enters Thoyibah.

Most Thoyibah residents do not own a TV. In 2017, a photo of a banner listing the rules of Thoyibah left many netizens concerned about the risks of having such a closed and exclusive society. The banner declared that women must wear a hijab, residents must pray five times a day, and banned smoking and music.

Jaelani made his way towards his house on the far side of the complex. On his front door, a sticker read "after you knock, give us time to put on our hijabs."

Jaelani was one of the first residents to move to Thoyibah in 2017 and managed to secure the position of neighbourhood head. He also works a day job in the marketing department of a local business.

To live in Thoyibah, Jaelani must pay Rp148 million (\$10,497) in installments over a 15-year period. The lease adheres to the sharia code of conduct, which means no interest or late fees. While Indonesia is full of sharia banks, not all can promise zero interest and fees.

“I think we’re the only village that implements sharia law in its truest sense, which is why I wanted to live here,” Jaelani said. “If you make a payment late, no one is going to come and repossess your home.”

Before moving to Thoyibah, Jaelani and his family lived in a diverse neighbourhood in Cikarang just over an hour drive from Jakarta, which only made him anxious about his future. Jaelani, like many other Thoyibah residents, believes places with mixed cultures and beliefs are a bad influence.

Many Thoyibah residents agree that pluralism without sharia law destroys morals. Jaelani had always dreamed of an orderly, homogeneous society where Islamic teachings reigned supreme. A neighbourhood without the gossiping aunties, loitering highschool dropouts, and drunk men playing cards.

“When we lived in a regular neighbourhood, my daughter only listened to popular music,” Jaelani said. “Now she just reads the Quran every day.”

The neighbourhood was once suspected of being a terrorist cell after it was accused of spreading intolerance. Police regularly monitored the village, especially following the spread of the banner in 2017.

In response, residents of Thoyibah began to implement a more moderate version of Islam, while doing damage control by hosting social events, giving out food to the needy, and holding public Quran recitations.

“We’re not intolerant like the media says. Anyone can come here,” Jaelani said. “In a legal sense, we’re not breaking any laws. We’ve never singled anyone out for their religion. But the concept we’re going for is an Islamic neighbourhood.”

Jaelani continued around the village, checking water pipes. The village has its own water system; well water is pumped into a reservoir, which then flows into each household. Residents only pay a maintenance fee for the service and pay nothing to the city.

Fadhil, a 27-year-old who goes by one name, also moved to Thoyibah to lead a life that met his religious standards.

“It’s in accordance with the prophet’s teachings,” he said. “Most neighbourhoods nowadays don’t align with Indonesian culture. That’s why we gathered here, even though our places of work are far away. Some of us even work in Jakarta.”

Life is peaceful in Thoyibah, at least according to Fadhli. Although the rules sound strict, they are loosely enforced. If, for instance, a man missed a prayer or was caught smoking, he would simply be reprimanded.

“We’re here to remind each other,” Fadhli said. “There are no sanctions.”

Issues that require more intervention are handled by a seven-person body of elders who make judgements according to their religious knowledge. “Whatever the elders say, we follow,” Fadhli said.

While housing options loosely based on Islamic teachings are common in Indonesia, they rarely come with sharia rule.

“Sharia housing usually only offers sharia-based payments, not the whole package of a sharia lifestyle,” Paulus Lusida, secretary general of Real Estate Indonesia (REI), said.

There are currently no laws regulating Muslim-only neighbourhoods, but Lusida worries that this trend may lead to exclusivity and isolationism, thus threatening relations between residents who choose to live in accordance with sharia and those who don’t.

The SETARA Institute recorded 202 violations against freedom of religion in Indonesia in 2018. The Indonesian Survey Institute noted no improvement in religious freedom under President Joko Widodo, who just started his second term.

Muslim-only communities appear to be an increasing demand, said Rosyid Aziz, head of the Sharia Property Development (DPS) community. The community oversees the development of 50,000 housing units across Indonesia.

“We have about 1,300 people in the Sharia Property Development community, with a total of 300-500 projects across a range of regencies and cities,” Aziz said.

Aziz also revealed that the Sharia-based payment system has piqued the interest of non-Muslims. Every now and then, they get a couple applications from non-Muslims, who are rejected without question.

"Pretty soon they'll be building another sharia neighbourhood next door," Jaelani said. "It looks like we're pioneers."

Published on VICE

<https://www.vice.com/en/article/xwebpk/inside-indonesias-sharia-village-havens>

In Indonesia, Muslim Youth are Turning to Their Clerics to Find Them a Wife

As religious conservatism increases in the country, more and more young people are choosing to marry early to avoid what Islam considers the sin of premarital sex.

For 26-year-old Adji Mubarok, taaruf is the only way to get married. Once he turned to religion in 2010, dating was no longer his thing. The last time he had a girlfriend was in 12th grade, and it only lasted three months.

Adji left his hometown in Tangerang to move to Yogyakarta soon after he graduated from high school. Since then, he has decided to be closer to Allah. In 2016, after he got his bachelor's degree, he went to an ustad or cleric to ask for help. Adji wanted to find someone to marry.

He then listed everything he wanted in his ideal partner. Adji was matched with Fani, who is now his wife. They got married in early 2017.

Taaruf is the practice of young, religious men asking clerics to help them find a woman. While it is similar to matchmaking, it's also different in many ways. The pair is forbidden to make physical contact, and individuals who want to meet must be accompanied by either family members or an older guardian to ensure compliance. *Taaruf* is a growing trend in Indonesia as young Muslims are turning to more conservative practices.

Adji however rejects the notion that people practice *taaruf* just because they want to get married immediately, adding that it's not as easy as it sounds. In his own experience, it took him a year

to get to know his partner. During the *taaruf* process, they were not allowed to meet up without a guardian. They couldn't talk to each other every day. Flirting was also prohibited.

"Let's get this straight, *taaruf* is more than what you think it is. You don't get married right after meeting a potential partner," said the Islamic business law graduate from Yogyakarta.

Adji works in Sharia property marketing, but also actively writes for "[Indonesia Tanpa Pacaran](#)" (Indonesia Without Dating), a conservative social movement that now has nearly 1 million followers on Instagram. He thinks *hijrah* – or coming back to religion – and *taaruf* movements, have gained momentum in recent years, especially in big cities. "The younger generations show great enthusiasm to learn this practice," he told VICE.

In 2014, Tri Wahyu Nugroho started a website called [rumahaaruf.com](#) for Muslim youth who are interested in *taaruf*. Rumah Taaruf currently has 7,000 followers, but the 34-year-old claims to have mediated more than 330,000 people in the *taaruf* process.

Rumah Taaruf was initially a subforum on the now-inactive site [myquran.com](#) in 2010. In the subforum, users exchanged their CVs to find prospective partners. If they both fit each other's criteria, they planned to meet up. Nugroho saw this as a great opportunity to make his own Rumah Taaruf website. His purpose is to build a platform which is in line with Islamic teaching.

The procedures are still essentially the same. Firstly, users upload their CV on the site. If a guy is attracted to a woman, he contacts the administrator to arrange a schedule for them to meet. Nugroho said the meeting will be at a grand mosque near where the woman lives, with the assistance of Rumah Taaruf. If they feel chemistry, they can decide when to meet the family.

According to Nugroho, 66 couples have been married since 2014 thanks to Rumah Taaruf. He can mediate four partners in one day. He also says Rumah Taaruf never charges a penny for the mediation process.

"Not everyone we mediate ends in marriage," he said. "Most of our male clients don't feel the chemistry. We assume the main factor is the woman's appearance. They probably look more attractive in pictures. Or maybe their parents don't like them."

Rumah Taaruf is only one of many forums that offer *taaruf* services. On Nugroho's site, there is no age limit to join. He claims that the youngest members are 19 years old, and the oldest are

55 years old, but this is difficult to confirm. When asked about child marriage, a prevailing issue in Indonesia, he countered that his organization “still follows the marriage law.”

The concern of *taaruf* contributing to an increase in child marriages is only one of many other debates surrounding the practice. The movement's supporters often encourage Muslims to undergo *taaruf* so they can have sex without sin, as Islam sees sex as sinful if it's done outside marriage. But critics argue that *taaruf* targets young school age individuals, who are not mentally fit for marriage, and have no knowledge of sex education or reproductive health.

It also hasn't helped that many young celebrities were eager to turn to Islam after the *hijrah* movement gained momentum ahead of the 2014 Indonesian presidential elections, when religious populism was on the rise. Other critics note that young married celebrity couples who are part of the movement to marry young, along with increasing conservatism in Indonesia, play a significant role in making *taaruf* a trend. Its popularity is also raising concerns among women's rights activists.

“This will lead to the emergence of anti-equality politics, where women's morals are controlled in such a way, and that good women are those who married young,” said Lathiefah Widuri Retyaningtyas, the coordinator of Jaringan Muda organization, which fights for gender equality. *Taaruf*, critics believe, reinforce the conservative and traditional belief that a woman's purpose is to have a family and serve her husband – doing anything else would make her look like a “bad Muslim”.

The concern is further fueled by the *hijrah* movement's savvy use of social media to post eye-popping visuals and easy-to-understand religious quotes to attract young people. Posts criticize dating, reiterate stereotypes of women's roles as subservient to their husbands, and insist that marriage is the path to true happiness.

Najib Kailani, a lecturer of interdisciplinary Islamic studies at Sunan Kalijaga State Islamic University, is worried about what he called the strengthening of conservatism, which comes with the rejection of any law that's not Allah's law. “They not only reject other religions' beliefs, but also Islamic teachings which they considered deviant,” Najib said.

But for youth like Adji, the criticism is unfounded. He contends that *taaruf* has served him well.

In their first two years of marriage, Adji claims they had never encountered significant domestic problems.

“People say that you need to date someone for a long time to ensure you know your partner well,” said Adj. “But that’s not always the case. I knew my wife only for a short time. But we haven’t had any problems along the way.”

Published on VICE

<https://www.vice.com/en/article/pajqj8/taruuf-indonesia-muslim-youth-early-marriage-premarital-sex>

Asia's Newest Nation of Timor-Leste Is Fighting for LGBTQ Rights

The nation of Timor-Leste is predominantly Roman Catholic. Yet it's leading a fight for LGBTQ rights in a part of the world where such rights are increasingly under attack.

On a sunny morning last July, thousands of Timor-Leste residents took to the streets of Dili. Clad in white shirts, gripping rainbow-striped banners and flags, they were there to celebrate the city’s annual Pride Parade. What began in 2017 with a few hundred attendees now welcomes an annual turn-out of 1,500, along with a procession of floats and a marching band—all to celebrate inclusivity and support the nation’s queer community.

“We have people from all sorts of backgrounds this time,” explained LGBTQ activist and member of the Pride Parade committee, Natalino Guterres. “I’m so happy to see them march and be proud of who they are.”

The parade is just one part of the nation’s LGBTQ community’s ongoing fight for acceptance. National independence heroine and LGBTQ activist Bella Galhos has conducted extensive research into the experiences of Timor’s LGBTQ population, and found that 86 percent of the community have experienced psychological and physical violence, much of which comes from family members.

“The biggest obstacle the LGBTQ community in this country faces is their families,” Galhos reflects. “After they come out to their families, they face rejection. Sexual, physical, and mental violence. And that’s just from their families. What can you expect from this society?”

Bella is no stranger to abuse: she was only three when her father sold her for US\$3 to an Indonesian soldier, describing her as having a “dominant, masculine personality.”

This kind of abuse was visible all around while she grew up. She recalls a transgender woman being abused by her family and dragged around her village in an attempt to “cure” her. “Her brother tied her up, stripped her naked, and dragged her from a car,” Bella said. “He took her around the village just to humiliate her.”

Since 2000, Bella and her partner have run Arcoiris, a shelter for LGBTQ victims of violence. The name, fittingly, is *rainbow* in Portuguese. She currently has four people staying at her shelter.

Violence has also been a constant in the life of LGBTQ activist Romiaty da Costa Barreto. From a young age Romiaty, who is a transgender woman, was aware of her gender identity and expressed it by wanting to wear women’s clothing. But when she did she was taunted by others in her village and accused of bringing shame to her family. In the years since, Romiaty has used this experience to open up a dialogue. “I’m used to facing people head on,” she said. “We need to make friends and educate.”

Despite the violence, persecution, and discrimination faced by the LGBTQ community, Timor-Leste is a relatively progressive nation when compared to other parts of Asia. In 2017, Prime Minister Rui Maria De Araujo spoke out openly in support of LGBTQ rights, becoming the first Asian head of state to do so.

“Every person has the potential to contribute to the development of our nation, including the LGBTQ community,” he said.

Araujo’s support has continued in the years since. Last year he sent representatives to the Pride Parade to march in solidarity.

Interestingly, many queer individuals have also found support within the Catholic Church. While the church hasn’t taken an official stance in support on LGBTQ rights, many congregations have got involved to support the community. A nun even volunteered to lead the prayer at the 2017 Pride Parade.

Via,* a nun and LGBTQ volunteer who took part in the 2018 pride parade, explained that many in the church are concerned about the discrimination faced by the community. “We as the Catholic church believe that LGBTI people are God’s creation. Because they’re not making it up, they were born that way.”

But while individual and organisational support is encouraging, the LGBTQ community still faces many obstacles when it comes to living life safely and openly. The government has yet to make regulations that truly protect the rights of LGBTQ people; even though Timor-Leste signed a joint statement on ending acts of violence and related human rights violations based on sexual orientation and gender identity in 2011.

As a result, LGBTQ individuals still face discrimination in Timor-Leste. According to Romiaty, LGBTQ citizens often have difficulties in accessing public health facilities. Her status as a transwoman also makes it difficult for Romiaty to change her name.

“For transgender people, one of the biggest challenges is to get ministry jobs, like working in Governor’s offices. Dressing as a woman when applying for a job in the government is also very hard,” said Romiaty.

Despite all the difficulties, Bella Galhos is optimistic that the future of Timor-Leste’s LGBTQ population is as colorful as a rainbow.

“Timor will change. Must change. Because we say so. And not only do we say it, we do it,” she concluded.

Published on VICE

<https://www.vice.com/en/article/wjvqgn/asias-newest-nation-of-timor-leste-is-fighting-for-lgbtq-rights>

It Keeps Getting Worse for Indonesia's LGBTQ Community

This election is pouring fuel on an already raging fire.

Has there even been a worse time to be queer in Indonesia than right now? More than two years ago, the so-called "LGBT emergency"—a catchphrase used by politicians and the press to describe what is basically state-sponsored homophobia—started to make the rounds as a political talking point. Now, as the country enters another heated election year, this "emergency" has emerged as candidates' go-to issue to drive voters to the ballot box.

In a single month, the mayor of the conservative city of Padang, West Sumatra, led about 1,000 people on a march through the city to "reject LGBT," another announced plans to fine queer residents for being a "public nuisance," and a mob stripped and beat two transgendered women in the suburbs of the Indonesian capital.

And the list goes on, with incidents ranging in severity from public shaming and evictions, like this incident in East Java, to outright violence, like the hour-long attack in Bekasi, West Java. Across the country, local officials and mobs of angry men are rushing to prove just how against the LGBTQ community they can be.

It's not the first time experts warned that things were going to get worse as the country crept closer to election day. Back in late October, when police decided to arrest a gay couple for allegedly running a LGBTQ community Facebook page, one activist told VICE that it looked like politicians had identified LGBTQ as the new vote-getting issue after exhausting rhetoric about the made-up threat of communists seizing control of Indonesia.

That's because, according to a recent survey conducted by Saiful Mujani Research and Consulting, 87.6 percent of respondents said that they considered the LGBTQ community and "threat," while 81.5 percent of those questioned thought that they were "religious deviants."

And as this rhetoric intensifies, there's less political will for politicians who might disagree with the aims of these "reject LGBT" groups to speak up.

"There has been an organized effort by religious groups to criminalize the LGBTQ community," Dede Oetomo, of GAYa Nusantara, Indonesia's oldest LGBTQ organization, told VICE. "And the central government is too scared to take any action. I think political parties are too scared to speak up and protect us."

On the ground, this environment is causing Indonesia's LGBTQ community to live in fear of potential arrest or worse. Rina, a trans woman living in the suburbs of Jakarta, told VICE that she feels like she has to look over her shoulder all the time after being doxxed by a woman she once called a friend.

"I don't feel like leaving my *kost* anymore" she told VICE, referring to her rented boarding room. "I would rather go somewhere far away when I want to hang out."

But life wasn't always this hard for Rina. Back when she was a college student, she was able to attend an Islamic university without much issue. None of her friends or professors discriminated

against her for being a trans woman. Now, today, it's gotten so bad we're not even using her real name in this story to protect her from potential reprisals.

And, at least according to the data, she's right to be concerned. This month alone, there were three separate incidents targeting the trans community by the police, including one incident where officers detained, then sprayed trans women with a firehose, posting the entire thing to social media.

Instances of violence targeting the LGBTQ community are higher amongst trans women than anyone else, according to a study conducted by the People's Legal Aid Foundation (LBHM). That study found that 74 percent of all cases of violence and discrimination based on gender and sexual orientation that occurred in 2017 were targeting trans men and women.

With the election still more than five months away, experts warn that the worst of this might be ahead of us. And all of this is happening despite the fact that, outside of Aceh, Indonesia's only Sharia province, there are no laws criminalizing the LGBTQ community.

Published on VICE

<https://www.vice.com/en/article/yw7be5/homophobia-increases-as-indonesia-election-nears-lgbt>

Want to Report Your Neighbor for Following a 'Deviant' Faith? In Indonesia, There's an App for That

The prosecutor's office brings you an app one rights expert warned could cause "social disintegration."

Twenty-eight has been a year of tech controversies in Indonesia. This is a year when the county saw not one, but two, polygamy apps (oh, and a virgin auction site). A year when the central government's ongoing repression of the LGBTQ community resulted in the banning of numerous queer dating apps. And now, not to be outdone, the government itself decided to release what might be the most-controversial app of the year—an app for Indonesians to snitch on neighbors who might follow "deviant," or "misguided" religions.

[Smart Pakem](#) is an app released by the Jakarta prosecutor's office last week that lists, among other things, religious beliefs and organizations that are already banned by the central government, fatwas issued by the Indonesian Council of Ulema (MUI), and details about the beliefs or practices that the office deemed troublesome and presumably worth investigating. The

app even goes further, including information about the so-called "leaders" of indigenous faiths and their addresses as well.

So why is the prosecutor's office making an app that doxxes local religious figures and snitches on people who want to practice their faith in a different way? Rights groups and critics were wondering the same thing.

"What is so wrong about people seeking spirituality in their own way?" Halili Hasan, a researcher at the Setara Institute, told the *Jakarta Post*. "Pakem teams result in majoritarianism, where the many decide on what is good for the few."

"This is the first time we've ever had an app like this that threatens human rights and democracy in Indonesia," Choirul Anam, a commissioner with the National Human Rights Committee, told the local press. "[This app] is counterproductive to all the government's efforts. The High Prosecutor must take it down so it doesn't interfere with the government's efforts to build our democracy."

So what's going on here? The prosecutor's office and the Attorney General's Office both say the app is within their legal rights, and in-line with their goals as legal organizations.

"Now we have a way to digitally monitor [people and their faiths]," Yulianto, an intelligence assistant at the prosecutor's office, told *Kompas.com*. "This app was also developed for the sake of transparency and to educate the people. We've already received some reports through the app."

Now let's put aside the weird idea that an app that turns everyone into a spy somehow also makes the legal system more transparent and point out that no one but a member of a state institution is going to be happy about having a new way to "digitally monitor" anyone in Indonesia.

Mukri, the AGO's spokesperson tried to defend the app as well, but only threw more fuel on the fire by saying, "You have to understand the philosophy behind the creation of this app. It is meant to educate the public and it is within the AGO's authority. We want to create an inventory to make it easier for the public to check whether a group is banned or not. Also, if someone reports a group through the app, it doesn't mean that it will be destroyed immediately. It just helps the AGO to investigate further."

Oh, cool. So none of these beliefs are going to be *destroyed immediately*, at least not without an investigation first. What a relief.

Now if you're outside Indonesia, you might be a bit confused here as to why the authorities feel a need to monitor citizen's beliefs like this, so let me give you a quick primer on how the state sees religion. Indonesia, legally, only recognizes six faiths, three of which are Abrahamic (Protestantism, Catholicism, and Islam) and the rest have roots in neighboring countries (Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism). Everything else, including Judaism, isn't recognized by the state, so it's not seen as a legal religion. Same goes with no religion at all.

In Indonesia, your religion is a big part of your life. It's on your government ID card. It's something to consider when you want to get married, because the state requires the signature of a religious official to approve a marriage and plenty won't marry an inter-faith couple.

Now, it wasn't always this way. Way back before the arrival of any of the Big Six, Indonesians had their own local, indigenous faiths. There were literally hundreds of them and a lot were animist or mystical in nature, and for much of the country's existence, the state refused to accept that any of these faiths even existed. It didn't let people write their own indigenous religion on ID cards until last year, and even then, the only option was the vague "Believers of the Faith."

And of the Big Six, only certain strains of the religions are seen acceptable. Shia Muslims are the subject of routine discrimination and sporadic violence. Ahmadiyah Muslims have had their mosques forcibly shuttered, their homes burned, and some of them were even killed by angry mobs. The leader of the Gerakan Fajar Nusantara (Gafatar), a local Islamic sect, was jailed for blasphemy. His followers were driven out of their village, their homes set ablaze. The list goes on. There were nearly 500 instances of religious intolerance under President Joko Widodo's first term in office alone, and more than 1,400 under former president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono.

Since Indonesia's independence, at least 60 indigenous faiths have gone extinct, according to data compiled by Tedi Kholiluddin, director of the Institute of Social Studies and Religion of Central Java, according to an interview in *Tempo Magazine*.

And all of this was before the prosecutor's office decided to make an app that encouraged people to spy on how their neighbors pray and inform the government if they don't like what they see. It's only going to make things worse, potentially leading to a "dangerous consequence by causing social disintegration," Amiruddin Al-Rahab, a commissioner with the National Commission on Human Rights, told Reuters.

"When neighbors are reporting each other, that would be problematic," Amiruddin said.

Published on VICE

<https://www.vice.com/en/article/ev3pvm/indonesia-religious-intolerance-deviant-faith-spying-app>

Religious Freedoms Continue to Slip in Indonesia

Turns out religious intolerance is a problem under the Jokowi administration too.

The 2014 presidential election was supposed to be a turning point for Indonesia. The country, one of the biggest—and youngest—democracies in the world, had elected Joko Widodo, an outsider candidate who captured hearts with promises of reform.

But four years later, Jokowi is looking a lot like his predecessor Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono in at least one measurement—instances of religious intolerance. A recent report by the Commission for the Disappeared and Victims of Violence (Kontras) on Jokowi's first term in office found that 488 instances of religious intolerance involving nearly 900 victims had occurred under his watch.

"They (the Jokowi administration) have failed to meet their promises about human rights," Yati Andriyani, of Kontras, told the Indonesian news magazine *Tempo*.

It's a continuation of a problem that plagued much of SBY's two terms in office and another sign that the country's constitutionally-enshrined pluralism is being slowly eroded by the rising influence of Islamic fundamentalist groups. Indonesia today is a far more intolerant place than it was in the recent past, even taking into account the sectarian clashes of the early aughts (those were all bloody, traumatizing incidents, but they were also isolated to specific communities and fed more by local tensions than national policy). Hardline Islamist groups like the FPI are more powerful than ever, anti-LGBTQ sentiment is basically a de-facto government policy, and both the use of the blasphemy law and the authority of Sharia police in Aceh have greatly expanded.

All of this happened during Jokowi's first term in office. But it all also has roots in the previous administration helmed by SBY. Under SBY, Indonesia implemented a so-called "religious harmony law," that, in name, was meant to increase religious harmony, but, in reality, changed the balance of faiths in this pluralist country. If, in the past, Indonesia was a nation of six equal, and officially recognized, religions, under the religious harmony law, it became a place where minority religions had to take great care not to offend the feelings of the majority. And in a

country where 87 percent of the population identifies as Muslim, the majority is always the same.

That law created a network of government-backed "Regional Interfaith Communication Forums," or FKUB, where the majority had to approve the construction of new houses of worship. These bodies are notoriously difficult to deal with if you're trying to open a place of worship for any religion but Islam, making it near impossible in some conservative regions, like West Java, to open a new church, temple, or Shia mosque legally.

This resulted in the shuttering of dozens of churches, the closure of Shia and Ahmadiyah mosques, and, later, the decision to cover a Chinese confucian statue with a giant sheet. It's also what fed the rise in religious intolerance under SBY's watch, creating a new culture of intolerance that has continued well into Jokowi's first term in office.

Under the Jokowi administration, a Shia Muslim sect was chased out of their village, their homes themselves set on fire, and their leader jailed for blasphemy. Since then, the blasphemy law has been used to jail the former governor of Jakarta, a Chinese Christian, on claims that he spoke ill of the Quran and a Chinese Buddhist woman for complaining that her local mosque was too loud.

"Two things could happen," Usman Hamid, the director of Amnesty International Indonesia, said of the blasphemy law. "If there is an interpretation of religious teachings that is considered deviant, you could go to jail, or if someone accuses you of spreading hostility, you could end up in jail too."

And these high-profile cases are just the tip of the more than 480 instances of religious intolerance to occur between the years of 2014 and 2018, according to the Kontras report.

The Jokowi administration has made strides in recognizing local faiths—the religions that predate the arrival of the six recognized faiths in the constitution—by allowing people to write "local faith," on their government ID cards instead of whatever religion the government told them to write. But this decision has done little to help the situation on the ground, where practitioners of these centuries-old indigenous religions are still pressured to convert, said Rukka Sombolinggi, the secretary general of the Indonesian Indigenous Society Alliance (AMAN).

“The pressure to convert to one of the recognized religions hasn’t stopped,” Rukka told VICE. “I’ve even seen myself religious authorities visit villages to try to convert followers of local minority religions.”

Meanwhile, Jokowi's running mate in next year's presidential election is Ma'ruf Amin—a prominent Islamic figure with the Indonesian Council of Ulema (MUI) who was involved in the drafting of the same SBY-era regulations that rights activists say are behind the rise in protests and forced closures of churches and temples.

But someone's past doesn't always determine how they will act in the future, and Ma'ruf, for his part, is trying to distance himself from some of his policies and statements that put him at odds with Jokowi's stance human rights in recent months. When questioned about the Kontras report, Ma'ruf told reporters that he saw a lot of mistakes on the part of the government in there.

“There’s obviously a lot we need to fix,” he said. “I’m certain that Jokowi’s second term will be better.”

Published on VICE

<https://www.vice.com/en/article/negg8b/religious-freedoms-continue-to-slip-in-indonesia>