

Indonesia: Narrow-mindedness versus diversity

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“The introduction of Sharia-based regional laws in several Indonesian provinces has aggravated the sociopolitical climate in the world’s most densely populated Muslim country. Yet it has also aroused resistance.”(Qantara)

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Actually Lilies Lindawati only wanted to get a ride home from work on February 27 of this year. The 35-year-old factory worker had finished working a late shift and was waiting in the industrial town Tangerang in front of the gates of the Indonesian capital Jakarta for the connecting bus to her hometown, something she did every evening.

But a few days before the town Tangerang had passed a new anti-prostitution law, according to which women on the streets alone after dark have to prove that they are not prostitutes. The police arrested the mother of two, allegedly because she was wearing lipstick, and detained her without notifying her family.

Only three days later did Lilies’ husband found out where she was after she had been convicted of prostitution and fined 300,000 Rupiahs (around 26 euros) despite her protestations of innocence. This is equivalent to nearly one half of a worker’s wages in Tangerang.

Lilies shares her fate with roughly two dozen women who, out of shame, have not dared to go public. However, the Sharia-based regional laws in Tangerang are only one example of many in this country with the largest Muslim population in the world.

Sharia bylaws

Starting this year, in Makassar, the capital of South Sulawesi, female pupils are only allowed to wear long skirts; and in a small town in West Sumatra even non-Muslim women are allowed to leave their homes only if they wear a headscarf. Since regional autonomy was introduced in 2000, twenty-two communities and districts in sixteen of the thirty-two provinces of the country have passed so-called bylaws with elements of Sharia.

Most of these laws deal with increased Koran instruction for schoolchildren, compulsory

headscarves for women or severe punishments for extramarital sex, heavy alcohol abuse and gambling.

Only in the province Aceh, whose coast was destroyed by the tsunami at the end of 2004, have elements of Sharia actually been introduced by the central government. Since last year unmarried couples or indiscreet poker rounds in the former civil war region run the risk of being beaten with rattan sticks in public in front of a mosque.

Resistance against Sharia

Contrary to official surveys, however, large segments of the population in Aceh do not agree with implementing Sharia this way. "This is because it is always the common people who are punished for minor offenses, but nobody for instance in a high position [is ever punished] for corruption," explains human rights activist Azriana Rambe Manalu.

At present, in the national parliament 156 opponents are disputing with 134 advocates over the constitutionality of Sharia bylaws in the remaining provinces. Founded in 1945, the Republic of Indonesia is still a secular state that is based on the five pillars of the state philosophy Pancasila, which attempts to integrate diverse religions as well as different languages and cultures according to the motto "Unity in Diversity."

If one believes the surveys, then the majority of Indonesian Muslims are still moderate in their beliefs. Yet the vast majority has refrained from getting involved in the conflict between Pancasila and Islam just like the remaining 260 members of parliament and many high-ranking Indonesian politicians, who do not want to lose face with the more religious segment of the population.

Unlike Nadhlatul Ulama (NU): The largest Muslim organization in the country has clearly spoken out against passing Sharia bylaws. High-ranking Islam scholars affirmed at the NU's annual assembly at the end of July that they wish to respect the pluralism of the multi-ethnic state Indonesia as well as the Pancasila. "The state risks dissolution if some groups continue their efforts to turn Indonesia into an Islamic state," says NU chairman Hasyim Muzadi.

Guardians of public morals and radical assault troops

Nonetheless NU has spoken out in favor of stricter laws against pornography and immoral acts that could lead young people in particular to a hedonist lifestyle. In doing so, it is playing into the hands of groups such as the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) or the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS).

Unopposed for the most part by state authorities, the radical assault troops of the FPI consistently organize attacks on what they regard as immoral institutions whether it be an art exhibition with nude pictures or the editorial office of the Indonesian Playboy magazine.

The PKS, on the other hand, has been mobilizing the masses since the beginning of the year in order to push through a highly controversial bill for new anti-pornographic laws. This bill, if passed, would impose a new dress code on women throughout the country and greatly restrict free expression in art and the media. Kissing in public could result in a prison sentence.

The greatest potential for radicalizing Muslims in Indonesia, according to Islam scholar Farhan Effendi, lies in deficient education. Most schools in Indonesia suffer from a notorious shortage of money and teachers, and in religion classes pupils frequently only memorize the Koran without

understanding Arabic or the historical context of Islam.

Since young people are rarely exposed to alternative value systems on which they can orient themselves, the danger is high that they will join fanatic groups. "Such people later cling to mere formalities and regurgitate everything others hold in front of them," says Effendi. "And as long as nobody puts a stop to their actions, they naturally believe they are right."

P.S.

* From Qantara.de 2006. Translated from the German by Nancy Joyce. Posted on WLUML website.