

New Indonesian parliament urged to tackle sexual violence “emergency”

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Activists want lawmakers to revive a sexual violence bill that has languished for years due to conservative opposition

KUALA LUMPUR, Oct 1 (Thomson Reuters Foundation) - Lawmakers sworn into Indonesia's parliament on Tuesday are being urged to push through a sexual violence bill to protect women from abuse that rights groups say has reached “emergency” levels.

Sexual violence is prevalent in the Southeast Asian country of 260 million. Tens of thousands of people in recent weeks have protested against a proposed new criminal code that would outlaw sex outside marriage and penalise women who have abortions.

Women's rights activists are also calling on newly installed lawmakers in the world's third-largest democracy to revive a bill shielding women from violence that for years has failed to pass parliament due to conservative opposition.

Over 400,000 cases of violence against women, including domestic and sexual abuse, were reported in 2018 compared to nearly 280,000 in 2013, according to data compiled by the National Commission on Violence Against Women.

“We want to see the bill passed by 2020 because we have waited for too long,” Azriana Manalu, chairwoman of the government-backed commission which helped draft the legislation, told the Thomson Reuters Foundation by phone from Jakarta.

The proposed bill seeks to expand the crime of sexual violence to include harassment, exploitation and forced abortions and forced prostitution.

Conservative groups, including the Islamist Prosperous Justice Party (PKS), say the bill is “too liberal” since it does not penalise other sex-related acts such as adultery.

“It [the bill] has the potential to promote free sex and deviant sexual behaviours,” Jazuli Juwaini, a PKS lawmaker was quoted as saying by Indonesian news website Kompas in February.

An online petition opposing the bill has received nearly 170,000 signatures.

Violence against Indonesian women was thrust into the headlines in July when a woman was jailed for reporting sexual harassment and later pardoned following a public outcry.

Similar outrage was sparked in 2016 when a 14-year-old girl was gang-raped and murdered, prompting the government to approve the use of the death penalty for those convicted of raping minors.

Women's rights campaigners say the recent brutality against women and girls demonstrates the need for separate legislation to combat gender-based sexual assault.

"We have many gaps in our current legislation [which needs] to recognise the different forms of sexual violence women face," said Mutiara Ika Pratiwi, the head of Jakarta-based gender equality group Perempuan Mahardhika or 'Free Women'.

"The level of sexual violence we're seeing now has become a national emergency and we cannot afford to wait any longer," she added.

The 575 lawmakers, elected by popular vote in April, will serve five-year terms. President Joko Widodo will take his oath for his second term in office later in October.

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