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Maintaining Harmony: Indonesia's Inter-Religious Forum

By Jonathan Chen

SYNOPSIS

The Inter-Religious Harmony Forum (FKUB) in Indonesia had functioned since 2006 as the main arbiter on matters concerning interfaith relations, in particular the approval of new houses of worship. Its duties as a consulting body for religious by-laws in Indonesia is less often discussed.

COMMENTARY

IN THE wake of an escalation of conflicts between religious communities over sacred sites and places of worship, the Inter-Religious Harmony Forum (commonly known as FKUB or *Forum Kerukunan Umat Beragama*) was established in 2006. It was initiated by a Joint Regulation of the Minister of Religion and the Minister of Home Affairs to provide an advisory role at the provincial, regency and city levels on matters of inter-religious relations.

Seen largely as a consulting body, its primary role had been to arbitrate across religious lines and recommend approval of new houses of worship from all six officially recognised religions (Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism) in Indonesia. Its other duties are to advise on local regulations (*peraturan daerah*), decrees (*surat keputusan*) and circulars (*surat edaran*) related to matters of religion.

Majority's Inherent Advantage

The Forum, since its conception, had been accused of privileging bureaucratisation over being a platform where the aspirations of all religions could be manifested. Consisting of at least 21 members, the Forums are skewed towards favouring the dominant religion in each region.

This means that most regions in Java and Sumatra have greater numbers of Muslim members while provinces like North Sulawesi and East Nusa Tenggara have more Christian members appointed by the local chief executives (governors, regents, or mayors).

For example, in the East Java FKUB, Muslims number eleven out of the 21 members consisting of a representative each from organisations like Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Muhammadiyah and the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI), giving Islam a simple majority amongst the religions.

This often translates into Islamic votes overruling other minority votes, in the case of East Java. In addition, while the Forum's religious minority members may object to a ruling by refusing to sign the official statement issued by the group, key decisions were often already made by the governor with advice from MUI.

For instance, in 2012 the East Java FKUB issued a statement condemning Shi'a Muslims as heretics, in accordance with the East Java MUI fatwa and the decree issued by former Governor Soekarwo. Even though representatives from minority groups refused to sign the statement, it was still released as an official statement of the East Java Forum.

Informal Decrees and Circulars

Within the past few years, there was a conversion in the type of legal status for local religious regulations that saw an increase in less formal but still legally binding regulations. These took the form of decrees (*surat keputusan*) and circulars (*surat edaran*), in comparison to formal regulations (*peraturan daerah* or in short *perda*). This shift is seen as a strategic move by groups to make sure that regulations are harder to detect by the Ministry of Home Affairs or human rights and religious minority watchdog groups.

Such informal decrees and circulars are usually issued by local executives such as the governor, regent or mayor and would often first be delegated to the local agency (*dinas*) most relevant to the topic. Unlike that of a *perda*, which needed to be discussed and approved by the provincial legislature (DRPD I) or district/city council (DRPD II), decrees and circulars are exempted and only require the signature of the local executive.

In other words, these informal regulations do not require legislative consent and approval or checks and balances, resting solely on the prerogative of the local executive and bureaucracy.

It is thus common for religious power brokers to request and lobby for the passage of these informal regulations. Local executives are often willing to approve these requests in order to ensure electoral support. Most civil servants and bureaucrats also see these as devices to execute the wishes of local executives, thus few are willing to express disagreements for fear of facing retaliatory actions from the executives themselves.

Thus a decree or circular to ban people from celebrating Valentine's Day or holding Christmas Service for example, can be implemented within a short time. Local governments will deny the existence of such regulations as these informal regulations take the form of voluntary compliance (*himbauan*).

On the other hand, these informal decrees and circulars are also more likely to violate national laws. For example, the East Java governor's decree to limit Ahmadiyah activities in the province violates both the 1945 Indonesian constitution and the Law on Human Rights.

Strategies to Protect Religious Minorities and Beliefs

While it may seem that the odds are stacked against religious minorities, especially that of indigenous beliefs (*kepercayaan*) or sects considered deviant (Ahmadis and Shi'a Muslims), there are viable strategies that they can take to protect themselves, depending upon the context. For example, Indonesian Hindus practising their faith openly can opt to identify themselves more as a 'cultural group' (known as *aliran kepercayaan*) which are perceived as less of a threat by Muslim hardliners.

Christians, in a hostile environment, can be more attuned when promoting tolerance, by choosing not to use overtly religious rhetoric or take the approach of addressing more general issues concerning honesty, inequality and injustice that are also of concern to Muslims.

While the FKUB may not be a perfect vehicle for all occasions, harmony can oftentimes be achieved in various contexts without recourse to arbitration or legislation if sensitivity is respected. A minority religious group may not have to rely on state apparatuses if a delicate balance of tolerance, depending on the context can be achieved. This means not ruling out innovative strategies or adopting less invasive methods in order to protect the peace.

Jonathan Chen is an Associate Research Fellow with the Indonesia Programme, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore.

Nanyang Technological University

Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg