

Indonesia plans global Buddhist site at Borobudur temple

by [Amy Chew](#) | July 11, 2021



A handout photo. Indonesian student Christopher Reinhart touches a Buddhist stupa at the Borobudur temple in Central Java. *Christopher Reinhart*

Indonesia , the world’s most populous Muslim-majority nation, is seeking to preserve and promote the mystical 9th-century Buddhist Borobudur temple in Central Java amid growing intolerance, raising hopes it could escape the fate of Afghanistan’s Bamiyan Buddha statues.

Minister of Religious Affairs Yaquut Cholil Qoumas said Borobudur occupied a significant place of respect for Buddhists and officials were studying how to promote ceremonies “which

can be attended by Buddhists all over the world”, as part of plans to strengthen moderation in the country.

This comes three decades after Borobudur was listed as a Unesco World Heritage Site.

“The potential for Borobudur is very big ... the number of Buddhists in Asean is more than 40 per cent,” Yaqut told This Week in Asia , adding that he was “optimistic” that the temple could become an international centre of worship.

More than 90 per cent of Indonesia’s 270 million people identify as Muslims. Government figures suggest there are some 2.5 million Buddhists, but the community estimates the size of the group could be three times that.

In Southeast Asia, some 200 million people are Buddhist, making it the region’s second-largest religion after Islam.

The minister’s plans come at a time of rising intolerance in Indonesia, where Islamic militants have over the years attacked buildings of religious minorities, including churches.

Professor Greg Barton, chair of Global Islamic Politics at Australia’s Deakin University, said Minister Yaqut was in a “strong position” to strengthen plurality.

“This is exactly the sort of leadership which puts into practice the principle of Islam as *rahmatan lil alamin* [‘a mercy to all creation’].”

Borobudur itself came under attack in 1985 when extremists detonated 11 bombs on the temple, damaging nine stupas.

Archaeologist Chaidir Ashari, from the University of Indonesia, said those bombings were “shocking” and occurred during a large-scale restoration of the temple.



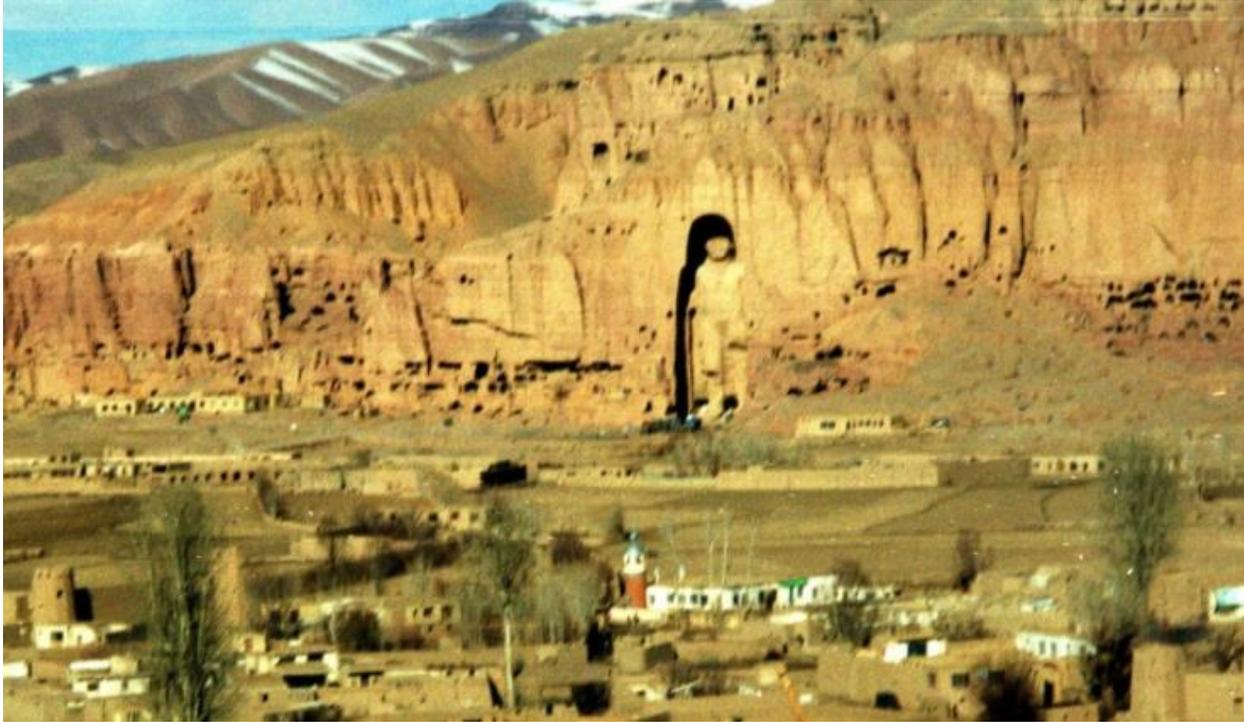
A handout photo. Archaeologist Chaidir Ashari.. PHOTO: Chaidir Ashari

Borobudur, with its ornate arches and carvings, was viewed as “idolatry” by militants, he said.

Chaidir said there were fears among the community that Borobudur would become a target again.

“Borobudur could share the same fate as the Buddha statues of Bamiyan in Afghanistan. Therefore it is very important for the security at Borobudur to be tightened at various sectors,” he said.

In 2001, the Taliban destroyed two giant Buddha statues in Afghanistan’s Bamiyan Valley. Their destruction paved the way for similar attacks against ancient monuments which are viewed as idolatry by extremists in Muslim-majority locations.



One of the Buddhas of Bamiyan in Afghanistan before they were smashed by the Taliban. PHOTO: Reuters

Among them – Islamic State’s 2015 destruction of Iraq’s fabled ancient city of Nimrud. That same year, Isis attacked Syria’s ancient city of Palmyra and beheaded its 83-year-old archaeologist Khaled al-Asaad when he refused to disclose the location of its valuable artefacts.

“Borobudur is an ancient monument whose existence can still be witnessed by Indonesian society,” Chaidir said. “Should it be destroyed, it would be a huge loss.”

The public needed to be aware that “radicalism” could harm many people and Indonesia as a whole, he added.

A religion of peace

Mindful of the sensitivities, Sudhamek Agoeng Waspodo Soenjoto, chairman of the Indonesian Buddhayana Council supervisory board, hoped Borobudur would not be described as a “global Buddhist worship centre”, as it could bring about “misunderstanding and misinterpretation”.

He said Borobudur could be further promoted by widening its activities to include all kinds of spirituality studies and activities.

“In my position as a Buddhist leader in Indonesia, I recommend it would be wiser if we used the term ‘Universal Centre for Culture and Spirituality Study for Various Religions’,” said Sudhamek, whose organisation is the oldest Buddhist body in the country.



A handout photo. Sudhamek Agoeng Waspodo Soenjoto, chairman of the Indonesian Buddhayana Council supervisory board. PHOTO: Sudhamek Agoeng Waspodo Soenjoto

Peter Carey, a visiting professor at the University of Indonesia's Faculty of Humanities and a specialist in Indonesian history, said the government's move to promote Borobudur was "brilliant and enlightened", but there needed to be efforts to explain the plan to the many Muslim communities surrounding the site.

"It will need to be discussed and socialised effectively in the local communities especially before it is implemented," Carey said.

While Indonesian churches have been the target of terror attacks over the past two decades, with the latest incident being the March suicide bombings at a church in South Sulawesi, the Buddhist community seldom comes into the crosshairs of militants.

Sudhamek associated this with the small size of the Buddhist community and also the religion's non-proselytising nature.

"We are not missionaries. For us, it is not our goal at all to convert people to become Buddhists," Sudhamek said.

"If you want to understand or know further and deeper about Buddhism, we are open to it. But there is no interest or goal to convert people," he added. "Peace is everything to us."

Attesting to the religious harmony between Muslims and Buddhists in Indonesia, 23-year-old student Christopher Reinhart said friends of his generation were "not discriminatory".

“In fact, in our Buddhism class at the University of Indonesia, there are some friends from other religions who also have attended the lecture,” he said.

Alex Arifianto, who researches Indonesian politics and political Islam at Singapore’s S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), said Yaqut was the first Religious Affairs Minister to make such a gesture to Indonesian Buddhists.

“The Indonesian Buddhist community has been marginalised in the past due to its very small size,” Arifianto said.

He added that most Buddhists were Indonesian-Chinese, an ethnic group making up 5 per cent of the population that has long faced discrimination .

Rich history

Borobudur was built around the 8th or 9th century under the Buddhist Sailendra Dynasty, and was discovered during the 1800s.

Its restoration in the 1980s was designed for the temple to last “hundreds of years”, but the huge numbers of visitors had threatened the structure of the temple, Chaidir said.

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought the temple some respite amid the border closures.

“Borobudur is currently at its safest. The reduction in visitors will allow the stones at the temple to breathe for a while,” said Chaidir, the archaeologist.

He said there was a need “to limit” the number of daily visitors to protect the site.

Carey, the historian, said Borobudur was an especially holy place for followers of the Mahayana Buddhist tradition.

“They still visit the site, but only for pilgrimage, not for religious services or for meditation and prayer,” he said.

Carey said Buddhists undertaking pilgrimages to Borobudur felt the “spiritual energy of the site has decreased” in recent decades “since the rise of Islamic fundamentalism”.

The significance of the holy place for Buddhists is thus relatively lower. “This means it is not really a sacred site or a temple any more,” he said.

Reinhart, the student, agreed. When visiting Borobudur, the “sacred impression does not appear within me”, he said.

“Unlike the Besakih Temple in Bali, which is indeed a tourist spot, the aura of spirituality is still very strong,” he said, referring to one of the most important and holiest temples for Balinese Hindus.

Reinhart added that he and most Indonesian Buddhists had very “vague” knowledge of Borobudur’s religious significance.

But while Borobudur was undoubtedly one of the world’s most famous Buddhist temples, it had mostly been used for tourism and education rather than prayer rites, said Kazem Vafadari, professor of tourism and hospitality at the Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University in Japan.

“When talking about Buddhist tourism in the practising sense, Thailand, with 94.6 per cent of its people being Buddhist, is more forward and famous for religious tourism,” said Kazem.

Most visitors to Borobudur were non-Buddhists interested in learning about the cultural heritage and history of the ancient temple, he said.

Pauline Suharno, president of the Indonesian Travel Agents Association, said Borobudur received some 60,000 visitors in 2019.

“This is due to Indonesia’s great pride in Borobudur, a relic of a great human civilisation,” she said.

This article was first published in [South China Morning Post](#).

<https://www.asiaone.com/asia/indonesia-plans-global-buddhist-site-borobudur-temple>