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Indonesia Says Schools Can't Make Girls Wear Head Scarves

The decree, which applies to public schools in the Muslim-majority country, came after a Christian father confronted an official at his daughter's school.

By Richard C. Paddock and Muktita Suhartono | March 5, 2021



A school in Padang, Indonesia, in January. A Christian resident of the city protested a public school's requirement that his daughter wear a head scarf. Credit...Iggoy el Fitra/Antara Foto, via Reuters

The father, a Christian, was upset that his 16-year-old daughter had been ordered to wear an Islamic head scarf at her public school in Indonesia. He met with the school's vice principal and protested the rule. And he didn't stop there: He streamed their conversation on Facebook Live.

“This is a requirement,” the vice principal, Zakri Zaini, sternly told the father, Elianu Hia, during their recorded conversation. “It has been stated in the school regulations.”

The [video](#) of the two men’s January conversation, which has been viewed more than 830,000 times, sparked a discussion across the majority-Muslim nation about religious discrimination, and it brought a swift declaration from the national government in support of religious freedom.

The government of [President Joko Widodo](#) last month issued a decree, which took effect on Friday, ordering public schools to respect religious freedom and prohibiting them from enforcing religious-based dress codes.

Indonesia, whose population is nearly 90 percent Muslim, officially recognizes half a dozen religions. But over the past two decades, the country has increasingly embraced [a conservative form of Islam](#), giving rise to greater [intolerance of minority groups](#).

The government’s decree, which declares that public schools cannot “require, order, oblige, encourage or prohibit the use of uniforms with attributes of specific religions,” was lauded by civil rights groups. More significantly, it was held up by the minister of religious affairs as a reaffirmation of Indonesia’s status as a tolerant nation.

The minister, Yaqut Cholil Qoumas, called the head scarf case “the tip of the iceberg” and said the decree was intended, in part, to remind the public that Indonesia is a diverse nation built on pluralism.

“Indonesia is neither a religious state nor a secular state,” said Mr. Yaqut, a leading Muslim cleric and former member of Parliament. “It unites and harmonizes national values and religious values.”



A women-only train car in Jakarta, Indonesia's capital, in 2017. Credit...Kemal Jufri for The New York Times

More than 60 local and provincial governments have adopted rules requiring women and girls to wear Islamic clothing in Indonesia's public schools since 2001, according to Human Rights Watch. The new decree clarified a 2014 Education Ministry regulation that was interpreted by some schools as allowing them to impose Islamic dress codes.

The new decree — an unusual move by the ministers of education, home affairs and religious affairs to join together to defend pluralism — applies to religious wear for students, teachers and school staff. The ministry of education can withhold funding and other assistance from schools that refuse to comply.

But it remains to be seen how vigorously the decree will be enforced by the central government, which sometimes struggles to implement its policies.

Indonesia is one of Southeast Asia's leading democracies, having had two decades of free elections and successful presidential transitions since it emerged from military dictatorship. But under its Constitution, the power of the national government is limited, and provinces and cities frequently flout the laws and regulations it adopts.

Religious dress codes typically require girls and female teachers and staff to wear a jilbab, as it is called in Indonesia, which covers the head, neck and chest.

“For two decades many state schools have required schoolgirls and female teachers to wear the jilbab, leading to bullying, intimidation and even expulsion or forced resignation,” said [Brad Adams](#), the Asia director at Human Rights Watch. “The new decree is a long overdue step to end discriminatory dress codes.”

The decree applies to all of Indonesia’s 166,000 public schools except those in [Aceh Province](#), which is semiautonomous and operates under a modified form of Islamic, or Shariah, law. Indonesia’s many religious schools are also exempt from the decree.



An elementary school in the Indonesian province of Aceh, which operates under a version of Shariah law. The new decree on religious garb in schools will not apply there. Credit...Chaideer Mahyuddin/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Jenni Hia, the Christian girl whose father challenged her school’s head scarf requirement, lives in Padang, the predominantly Muslim but not particularly conservative capital of West Sumatra.

The origin of Padang’s head scarf rule came to light when the former mayor, Fauzi Bahar, said he had implemented the policy in 2005. Many people protested at first, he said in an interview, but eventually they complied.

Non-Muslim students were not forced to wear a jilbab, but it was “recommended” because of its “many benefits,” he said. “If non-Muslim students do not wear the jilbab,” he said, “it will show them to be a minority.”

Mr. Hia, 56, an air-conditioning installer, has lived in Padang since 1986, and he and his family are part of a small Christian community.

“I live in harmony in my neighborhood,” he said. “I have good relations with my neighbors. They even support me on this issue and they are Muslim.”

After previously attending Christian schools, Mr. Hia’s daughter, Jenni, started attending classes at Padang Vocational Senior Secondary School 2, a public high school, in early January.

The school had not informed the family of the head scarf rule when she enrolled, Mr. Hia said, and she refused to wear one. She received five warnings before the school summoned Mr. Hia to meet with the vice principal.

Before the meeting, he searched for a provincial or education ministry rule requiring religious attire. He found none.

The situation was so “bizarre,” he said, that he decided to record the meeting and stream it live.

“This is the first time I encountered an incident like this,” he said. “I put it on live so there would be no accusation that I was making things up.”



A jilbab shop in Bogor, Indonesia. Credit...Adi Weda/EPA, via Shutterstock

During the meeting, Mr. Hia argued that it was a violation of his daughter's rights, and of Indonesian law, for a public school to require her to wear the symbol of another religion.

For her to wear a head scarf, he said, was akin to lying about her religious identity.

"Where are my religious rights?" he asked. "Where are my human rights? This is a public school."

But Mr. Zakri argued that the requirement was in the rule book. "It becomes awkward for the teachers when there are children who do not follow the rules," he said.

After the meeting, father and daughter signed a statement that she was not willing to wear a head scarf as dictated by school regulations, and that they would await a decision from "a more authoritative official."

Two days later, after the video went viral, the school's principal, Rusmadi, who like many Indonesians uses only one name, offered a public apology for the way the dress code had been applied. He acknowledged that 23 non-Muslim students had been inappropriately required to wear jilbabs.

"I apologize for any mistakes of the staff," he said. "It is obligatory to obey the rules. It is not obligatory for non-Muslims to wear Muslim clothes."

He added, "I guarantee that Jenni can still go to school as usual."

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/05/world/asia/indonesia-schools-head-scarves.html>