



Indonesia Religious Freedom Landscape Report 2020

Religious Freedom Institute:

“Bayt ar-Rahmah’s devout Muslim leaders represent the most theologically potent and operationally effective actors promoting religious liberty in the Islamic world today”

WASHINGTON, D.C.: On August 14, 2020, the U.S.-based [Religious Freedom Institute](#) (RFI) published a groundbreaking study titled *Indonesia Religious Freedom Landscape Report 2020*, which employs a revolutionary analytical framework based on the principle of “positive deviance.”

The report states that: “Despite the existence of major threats and challenges to religious freedom in Indonesia, it is nevertheless home to powerful actors that are systematically and institutionally maneuvering to strengthen the prospects of religious liberty in Indonesia, the Indosphere, and the world at large. Viewed from a regional or even global perspective, Indonesia thus embodies what scholars of child nutrition in the developing world—beginning in the 1960s and 1970s—came to describe as ‘positive deviance.’”

“As the Positive Deviance Collaborative notes, ‘positive deviance’ is based on the observation that in every community there are certain individuals or groups whose uncommon behaviors and strategies enable them to find better solutions to problems than their peers, while having access to the same resources and facing similar or worse challenges.”

One of the report’s key findings is that “Indonesia provides the most striking example of ‘positive deviance’ in an otherwise discouraging neighborhood... Significantly, Indonesia is the only Muslim-majority country in the modern world that has witnessed *a dramatic increase in the size and influence of its Christian population* since it became an independent nation state. This is in sharp and dramatic contrast to the near collapse of Christian minority populations in most of the Muslim-majority countries of the Middle East, North Africa, and even South Asia, Pakistan foremost among them... Though many factors are at work, one crucial reason that Indonesia is a relative bright spot within the religious freedom landscape of South and Southeast Asia and the Muslim world is a single civil society organization: the Nahdlatul Ulama [NU].”

Funded by Templeton Religion Trust as part of a three-year study (2017 – 2020) that examined the state of religious freedom in South and Southeast Asia, the RFI’s 88-page *Indonesia Religious Freedom Landscape Report 2020* singles out NU spiritual leaders as major drivers of Indonesian “positive deviance.” According to the report, “The integrity of these devout Muslim leaders; their honesty in acknowledging and addressing the instrumental manipulation of their own faith; their vast, 90-million strong following within Indonesia; and their extensive global network of supporters and allies render them capable of both defeating the anti-pluralist forces that threaten the gains of Indonesia’s democratic transition and realizing Indonesia’s strategic potential as an engine of civilizational progress throughout the Indosphere [South and Southeast Asia] and beyond.”

“Bayt ar-Rahmah’s devout Muslim leaders thus represent the most theologically potent and operationally effective actors promoting religious liberty in the Islamic world today, leveraging

the unique strength of Indonesia's indigenous, pluralistic and tolerant understanding and practice of Islam to promote religious freedom for all.”

In its “SWOT” analysis of Indonesia's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats vis-a-vis religious freedom, the RFI report states:

- ◆ There is a tendency for international actors, both in the Middle East and the West, to regard *Islam Nusantara* [East Indies Islam] as less “legitimate” than expressions of Islam practiced in the Middle East. This attitude facilitates the spread of ultraconservative Sunni Islam, whose basic tenets are inimical to religious freedom, and simultaneously inhibits the West from supporting those elements within Islam that offer the greatest hope for theological reform and religious freedom throughout the Muslim world.
- ◆ A variety of factors, including political correctness and identity politics, have prevented major actors in the West from acknowledging and addressing certain legacies within classical variants of Islamic law that severely restrict religious freedom. By avoiding hard theological conversations on this topic, while simultaneously prioritizing their economic and geopolitical interests in the Middle East, Western powers have been effectively complicit in the global spread of ultraconservative Islam for decades, thereby undermining pluralistic and tolerant expressions of Islam indigenous to Indonesia and other parts of South and Southeast Asia.
- ◆ These same factors inhibit the sweeping legal and ethical reforms that are a precondition for substantial progress on religious freedom in Indonesia and elsewhere in the Muslim world.
- ◆ Western media, as well as religious freedom analysts and advocates, tend to favor simplistic narratives that encourage a binary view of nations and the diverse actors therein. For example, the 2017 electoral defeat of the Chinese Christian governor of Jakarta and his subsequent conviction on charges of blasphemy have resulted in a majority of Western observers overlooking other, positive trends in Indonesian society.
- ◆ Western perceptions of Indonesia are often shaped by this binary tendency and accompanied by a distorted analysis of realities on the ground, as reflected in the annual Pew Global Religious Restrictions Report. In this report, Indonesia's Government Restrictions Index (GRI) and Social Hostilities Index (SHI) ratings are consistently higher than those of most Arab states. This is due partly to Indonesia's enormous population and relatively open democratic society, in which data can generally be collected and shared freely. It is also due to the Pew Report's failure to accurately weigh factors such as the freedom to change one's religion and practice it in public; the freedom of religious institutions to act independently of government; and the absence of any one established or officially favored religion.

These “core freedoms” lie at the heart of Indonesia's constitutional system, continuously in place since 1945, and are embraced by a majority of Indonesians. Each of these core freedoms is noticeably absent in the Arabic-speaking world, yet most Middle Eastern states, including Saudi Arabia (which does not allow the building of churches and enforces the death penalty for apostasy), have a lower GRI rating than

Indonesia. These essential facts about Indonesia are scarcely known in the West, due to the aforementioned binary tendency and distorted analysis by institutions such as Pew.

The launch of the RFI report was accompanied by a [webinar](#) that featured Indonesia's Home Affairs Minister Muhammad Tito Karnavian; Ibu Alissa Wahid, General Secretary of the NU Family Welfare Agency, founder and National Coordinator for Gusdurian Network Indonesia (GNI) and eldest daughter of former Indonesian president H.E. KH. Abdurrahman Wahid; Boston University Indonesia specialist Prof. Robert Hefner; and Mustafa Akyol, a prominent Turkish political commentator, frequent contributor to the *New York Times* and author of the critically acclaimed book *Islam without Extremes: A Muslim Case for Liberty*.

Mr. Akyol applauded “the positive steps Indonesia has taken over the decades... such as not using the term *kafir* (infidel)... To Indonesians I would say please preserve your pluralistic and tolerant traditions and advance them so Muslims around the world can look and see and say ‘Wow, Indonesia is doing it, why not us?’”

Minister Karnavian—who formerly served as commander of Indonesia's National Police force and head of Detachment 88, an elite unit tasked with tracking down and eliminating terrorist cells—stated that “the real challenge facing Indonesia today is the rise of intolerant groups and ideologies, such as Salafism. This is not an Indonesian strand of Islam, of course. It is a Middle East strand of violent religion that comes to spoil Indonesia... They wish to establish an Islamic state, which would lead to the breakup of our country.”

As Dr. Timothy Samuel Shah, RFI's Vice-President for Strategy and International Research, observes in the report's executive summary: “In a region where much wrong is being perpetrated by many governments and non-state actors, Indonesia is doing something right. Now is a good time for the rest of us to take note and learn all that we can from Indonesia's remarkable and multi-faceted example of ‘positive deviance.’”

[Read the full report.](#)