

Indonesia urged to repeal blasphemy laws

by [Trevor Grundy](#)

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London, February 10 (ENInews)--Indonesia has been urged to repeal its blasphemy laws and provide greater protection to religious minorities - including Christians and the Muslim Ahmadiyya sect - in order to safeguard its reputation as one of the world's most progressive and tolerant Muslim-majority countries.

"If extremists are allowed to continue to terrorise religious minorities with impunity, Indonesia's tradition of pluralism and religious freedom will be under threat," Kiri Kankhwende of Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) told ENInews.

CSW is a Christian organisation working for religious freedom through advocacy and human rights in the pursuit of justice.

According to CSW's Advocacy Director Andrew Johnson, "over the past two years there has been a dramatic increase in the number of violent attacks against religious minorities in Indonesia, which is a cause for serious concern."

Hundreds of Islamic extremists burnt down Christian churches in Indonesia on 8 February, two days after a mob lynched three alleged heretics -- all of them members of the Ahmadiyya sect -- in the latest outbreak of religious violence.

Reports said that up to 1,500 Muslims rampaged through the town of Temanggung, in Central Java province, after a court convicted a Christian man of blasphemy against Islam. Antonius Richmond Bawengan, 58, was jailed for five years for allegedly "spreading hatred" of Islam.

Outside the court, Muslims demanded that the man be handed over to the crowd. They stoned the court building, set fire to churches and threw stones at riot police who fired teargas to disperse them, according to press reports.

On 6 February, three members of the Ahmadiyya sect were murdered in Banten, West Java province, by a mob armed with machetes, clubs and stones that overran the house where they were praying. The Ahmadiyya are a religious group who consider themselves Islamic, although many Muslims do not accept them as part of Islam.

A Far East specialist at CSW told ENInews that there is no clear answer to why anti-Christian violence has escalated in recent months. "Extremists within Indonesia, with foreign funding and support, have seen that Indonesia is the largest Muslim majority country in the world. I suppose if Indonesia can be de-railed and be seen as less tolerant it would have serious ramifications for the region and indeed for the rest of the Muslim majority world," he said.

He said that some Muslim countries were taking their lead from Pakistan when it came to attacking non-Muslims accused of making blasphemous statements which offends followers of Islam. He said that at the same time, leaders of major religions in Indonesia are increasing their efforts to promote inter-faith dialogue and harmony. "They must be encouraged," he said.