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Indonesia's religious tensions



Churches were burnt in Jakarta in December

By Regional Analyst Rob Gifford

Violence between Christians and Muslims in Indonesia has increased dramatically since the downfall of President Suharto in May last year.



BBC Jakarta
Correspondent
Jonathan Head:
"The fear is that
there could be
further religious
clashes"

There was an outbreak of religious fighting in the Indonesian capital Jakarta last November. Then during January, more than 160 people died in religious fighting on the island of Ambon.

In February, 14 people were reported killed in the city of Ambon after gangs of Christian and Muslim youths brandishing

clubs, knives and swords attacked each other.

Heavily armed police tried to prevent further incidents, and police and soldiers had orders to shoot on sight anyone inciting rioting.

But how have such tensions exploded in what was previously a model of peaceful religious coexistence? And do the over-stretched Indonesian military have the resources to cope with the violence?

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Self-consciously Muslim government

Indonesia is largely Muslim, but Ambon, where the recent fighting has been concentrated, has traditionally been a predominantly Christian region.



Families grieving senseless deaths

One major cause of discontent among the Christian population is the emergence of a central government that appears much more self-consciously Muslim than before.

And indeed, many prominent opposition figures, such as Amien Rais, have strong Islamic backgrounds.

Former President Suharto had maintained a large number of Christians in his cabinet and military leadership, and many Muslims felt they were

underrepresented in positions of power.

As that situation has been reversed under President Habibie, Christians around the country have felt their position under threat.

Hungry people

This has further exacerbated an already delicate social situation, with millions still trying to cope with the increased economic insecurities of the last year.

Indeed, some of what has been described as religious violence may be attributable to nothing more than desperate acts by hungry people.

An additional spark to the violence has been the increase of migration within Indonesia.

Whereas indigenous Christians and Muslims have been able to live together peacefully for generations in many parts of Indonesia - and indeed Ambon has always been held up as a model of peaceful coexistence - internal migration, both forced and voluntary, has brought outsiders of both faiths to all corners of Indonesia.

These immigrants have often been less sensitive to the local co-operation between faiths that previously existed.

Stretched police force

In this section

[Megawati elected vice-president](#)

[Analysis: Indonesia's dream ticket?](#)

[Analysis: New hope for Indonesia?](#)

[Analysis: Megawati's struggle for power](#)

[Indonesian poll sparks violence](#)

[Wahid faces economic mountain](#)

[Election drama: In pictures](#)

[Habibie bows out](#)

[Megawati confirmed Indonesia victor](#)

[The election in pictures](#)

[A carnival of democracy](#)

[The fragile archipelago](#)

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The central government in Jakarta has said that it would like to leave local area commanders to deal with the problems.

But, with reports from Ambon saying that groups of soldiers patrolled the city in requisitioned cars and post office vans, it seems that local forces are stretched too far. Meanwhile, many have taken the law into their own hands.

A spokesman for the Indonesian military admitted they were stretched but said the government was hoping to set up an immediate reaction unit that could respond quickly, and be sent to any part of the huge archipelago that might need reinforcements.

'Balkanisation' of Indonesia

Despite the recent upsurge in violence, most analysts are playing down the possibility of a 'Balkanisation' of Indonesia - i.e. dissolving into complete anarchy along religious or ethnic lines as in Yugoslavia.

Despite the tensions in places like Ambon, the disputes are ostensibly religious ones. Apart from East Timor, and to a lesser degree Aceh and Irian Jaya, political secession and independence are not so much the issue, nor is ethnicity.

In addition, the religious grievances do not seem nearly as intractable as in the former Yugoslavia.

If a transition to genuine democracy takes place after elections in June so that all interest groups can express their grievances through legitimate political channels, then leaders of all communities hope that the violence of the uncertain transitional period can be contained.

But that is a big "if", and until that happens, the violence shows no signs of abating.

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